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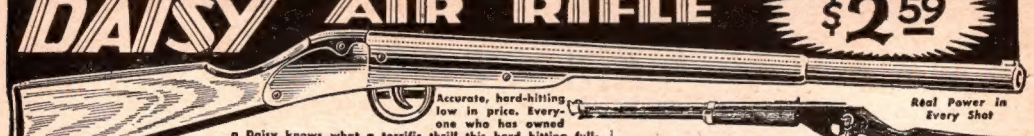

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VOLUME 36, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SEPTEMBER, 1949

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Guns of Mist River

By Jackson Cole

When Ranger Jim Hatfield sights a herd of steers being poured over the brink of a canyon, he scents foul play—and goes into fast action to smash a triple-forked conspiracy that menaces the range! 9

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HIYA, gals and galluses! How many of you, I wonder, have ever "camped out"? Camping is a vacation adventure, nowadays, from Texas west. But not so long ago it was a common experience among road or trail travelers. The custom was for them to pitch camp wherever night overtook them. There was an unwritten law of hospitality by which nobody ever objected to the presence of overnight campers. Most usually, they were welcomed as guests.

You'll find that to be the case even yet, in the far outlands.

I wish that every American, young and old, could have at least one camping experience. It'd help more than a stack of books to give understanding and interest to the study of U. S. history. Because camping was a regular way of life among our rugged pioneer ancestors.

The Days of Daniel Boone

Hardly more than four generations ago, only a narrow strip of land bordering the Atlantic was claimed by white civilization. Anybody who ventured beyond that near frontier had to leave home comforts beyond—and go camp-style.

That was about the time of Daniel Boone. In our last get-together I spoke of Daniel as the first of the "big three" noted American frontiersmen, the other two being Davy Crockett and Kit Carson.

I reckon Daniel Boone would laugh at modern campers, who figure they need two-three hundred pounds of duffle for a short outing. Daniel plunged alone into the wilderness at the age of 15—with nothing more than a gun and a dog!

Daniel was one of a family of 11 little Boones, born somewhere between 1732-46 (historians don't agree on the date) on the family farm about 60 miles from Philadelphia, then a town of about 10,000 people.

So he didn't have to go far to be alone.

According to accounts, his leavetaking came about through a ruckus at school. Seems as though the Irish schoolmaster was fond of a nip now and then, and kept a bottle stashed away in the woods near the school. Daniel found it, and in the spirit of mischief dosed the bottle with ipecac. Somehow, he was found out. He took off to escape a thrashing.

Hunter and Trapper

From then on, Daniel was more of a hunter and trapper than a student. Soon after this early "graduation," his family moved to North Carolina and settled on Yadkin River, near the present town of Wilkesborough.

About that time (1752) came war between the English and the French, also the Cherokee War that brought massacre and ruin to settlers. Daniel was in the thick of it. The campaign took him beyond the Appalachians, into what is now Kentucky, Tennessee and northern Alabama. In those days, two centuries back, that was "western wilds." It was beautiful country and abounded in wild game.

The abundance of game had made Kentucky, especially, a favorite hunting ground for Indians since time immemorial. The powerful Iroquois were the head men, until they ceded it to the English and pulled out northward, leaving the Shawnees, Chickasaws and Cherokees to wrangle over it among themselves and battle the daring whites who ventured there.

That was how Kentucky got the name, "dark and bloody ground."

Along about 1761, while out hunting, Daniel Boone and another adventurer were captured by a band of hostile redmen. After a few days, they escaped and returned to the camp they had shared with four other men.

They found the camp a heap of ashes. Never did they learn the fate of their four

companions. It remains a profound mystery to this day.

The Lone Survivor

Boone and this man Stuart built a log house and remained in the Kentucky wilderness. But during that time, Stuart was killed and scalped. Daniel didn't return to his home and family on the Yadkin until two years later, the lone survivor of the original party of six.

Boone was "dead sot" on returning to Kentucky, so about 1773 headed a well-armed emigrant party of seven families, including more than 40 men. Indians attacked them in Cumberland Gap. In the desperate battle that followed, many of the party were killed, including Daniel's eldest son, James. They finally wound up in a more peaceable country to the south, in Virginia. At that time, Kentucky was actually a part of the colony of Virginia.

Boone, one of the first white men to explore Kentucky, knew it better than anybody else, so at length Governor Dunmore of Virginia gave him command of 3000 men to go back and make that land safe for settlers.

They fought many Indians of many tribes —the Delawares, Mingos, Wyandottes and Cayugas among them—so that a peace treaty was made. But for years thereafter there were outbreaks and massacres. But a settlement named Boonesborough was established, and from there started the first westward land rush, just about the time the first shot of the American Revolution was fired at Lexington.

The war with the British slowed up western settlement, because the hostile Indians became allies of the crown forces and made life precarious for frontier families. Boonesborough was attacked time and again. The place was beseiged. The people suffered greatly for salt. So Daniel Boone headed a 30-man expedition to go fetch a supply of that simple but precious commodity.

Adopted by Blackfish

Again he was captured by Indians, but instead of being killed was adopted by Blackfish, chief of the Pawnees. He lived with the Indians for months, unable to escape. Until the tribe went on the warpath. He took off for Boonesborough, to warn his friends and

(Continued on Page 89)

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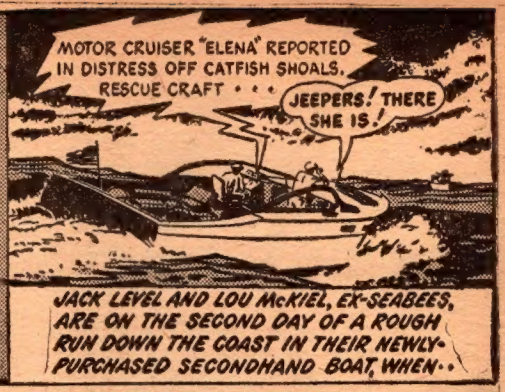
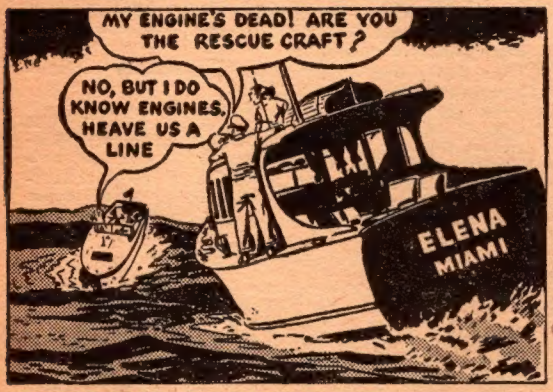
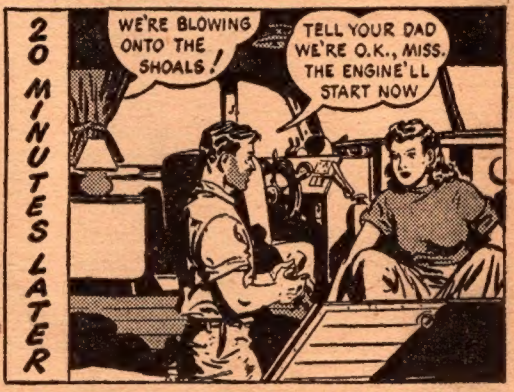


JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIEL, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED SECONDHAND BOAT, WHEN..





WE PLAN TO FIX UP OUR TUB AND START A FISHING SERVICE
THAT'S A WASTE OF TALENT. MY CONSTRUCTION FIRM NEEDS MEN LIKE YOU
HE'S CERTAINLY HANDSOME

TAKE IT FROM ME, MEN, YOU GET SWELL-LOOKING, COMFORTABLE SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ACCURATELY AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES.
ASK FOR THEM IN THE CONVENIENT NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE.
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
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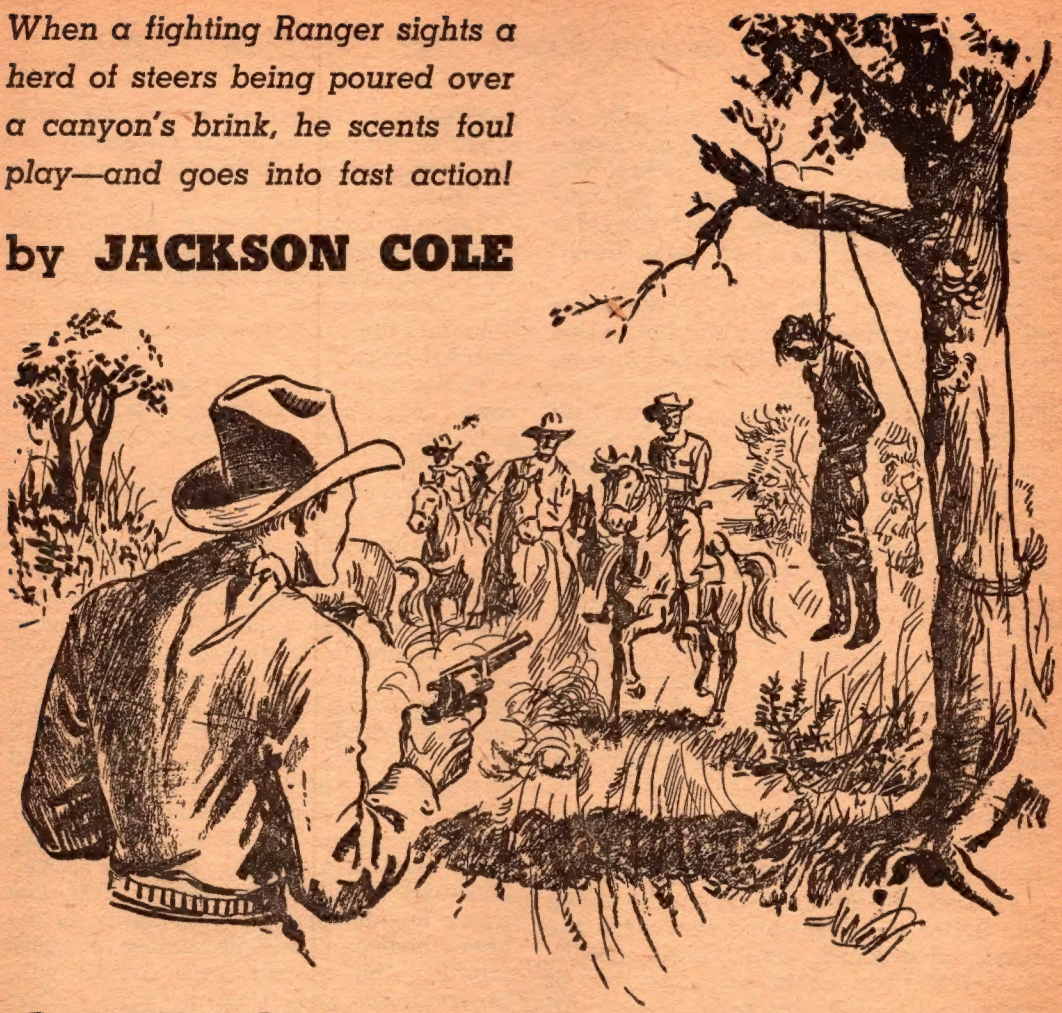
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

When a fighting Ranger sights a herd of steers being poured over a canyon's brink, he scents foul play—and goes into fast action!

by **JACKSON COLE**



GUNS of MIST RIVER

a Jim Hatfield novel

CHAPTER I

Cinch Ring Brand

WHEN Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf of the Texas Rangers, first saw the herd, it was a tawny dust cloud rising slowly against the distant skyline; a cloud that rolled steadily westward, its golden mist swirling upward to dissipate in the blue of the Texas sky. From where Hatfield sat his great golden horse, a long slope tumbled steeply downward to the level rangeland beyond. Still farther beyond was Mist River, winding and shining in the sun, cleaving the green and amethyst prairie that dimmed eastward into the distances.

To the south of the ridge crest, Mist River abandoned its low though steep banks and dived into the dark mouth of a towering canyon. The rimrock of the can-

yon was a torn and jagged saw-edge of black stone mottled with white and banded with scarlet and russet and yellow. The hills were frowning battlements the canyons pierced, looked like great irregular blocks of granite that had been hurled helter-skelter by Titans at play.

Eastward from the crest of the ridge ran a trail, winding down the long slope to slice off at the river's brink and flow on wearily beyond its gleaming waters. Following the general direction of this trail was the approaching dust cloud. Hatfield could vision the churning hoofs beating its surface into the rising fog that glittered in the sunshine.

Hatfield eyed the approaching herd, still invisible under the dust cloud, with the disapproval of an experienced cattleman.

"No sense in shoving cows along like that, especially in warm weather," he told Goldy, the horse. "Runs the fat off 'em. That jigger will find himself pounds light per critter when he gets them to the pens. He'd better be saving their wind for this sag and the rough country beyond. Reckon he's headed for the railroad town we passed through ten miles to the west."

Another ten minutes and the bouncing dots under the dust cloud that were the individual animals were plainly visible. Shortly Hatfield could see a number of horsemen shoving the herd along. All were behind the moving cows.

"Nobody at point or swing," he mused. "Everybody riding drag. Well, reckon there isn't much chance for them to turn with the trail running straight across the range, so nobody's needed along the sides of the bunch. And that's always the system when a jigger is in a hurry. But I still can't figure why he's got such a hustle on. That is unless—"

HE LEFT the sentence unfinished, but his long green eyes narrowed slightly with thought. Instinctively his slender, bronzed hands dropped to the butts of the heavy black guns that sagged from the double cartridge belts encircling his lean waist. He loosened the long Colts in their carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters. After all, a hustling herd might be shoved along by somebody under whose name their brand was not registered.

"Though how anybody could figure to wideloop a herd in this direction is more than I can make out," he remarked aloud. "No turning aside in the hills west of here, and the trail runs right through that railroad town."

Thoughtfully he eyed the approaching cows. They were less than a mile from the river bank, now, and coming along at a great rate.

"For the love of Pete!" Hatfield ejaculated a little later.

At undiminished speed the herd thundered to the river's brink. Behind the lumbering cows the horsemen waved slickers and hats, slapping the frantic beefs across their rumps. Hatfield could almost hear the shouts and whoops. He saw the riders fan out to one side, race along the herd, veering it from the trail and to the left. Then they fell back and charged in a strung-out line at the rear.

The cows reached the edge of the perpendicular bank, bawling and bleating. Over the lip went the leaders, shoved ahead by the charging mass behind. The water foamed up in silvery spray as the heavy bodies crashed its surface. In scant minutes the stream was dotted with brown heads and heaving backs. Then the current caught the swimming animals and swept them downstream. One after another they vanished from sight into the dark mouth of the canyon.

When the last cow was in the stream, the horsemen swerved their mounts and diagonalled south by east across the prairie. They did not back-track by way of the trail.

And with good reason. Sitting his horse on the ridge crest, too far away to hope to take part, even had he desired, in the hectic activity, Hatfield saw the next act of the peculiar drama.

A second dust cloud had for some time been rising in the east. Now Hatfield saw a string of bouncing dots swerve from the trail and stream southward, apparently bent on intercepting the speeding horse-

men who had shoved the herd into the river. At a long slant the two bodies of riders drew together, toward the apex of a triangle that would be the curve of the rangeland around the jagged eastern approaches of the hills that flanked the canyon.

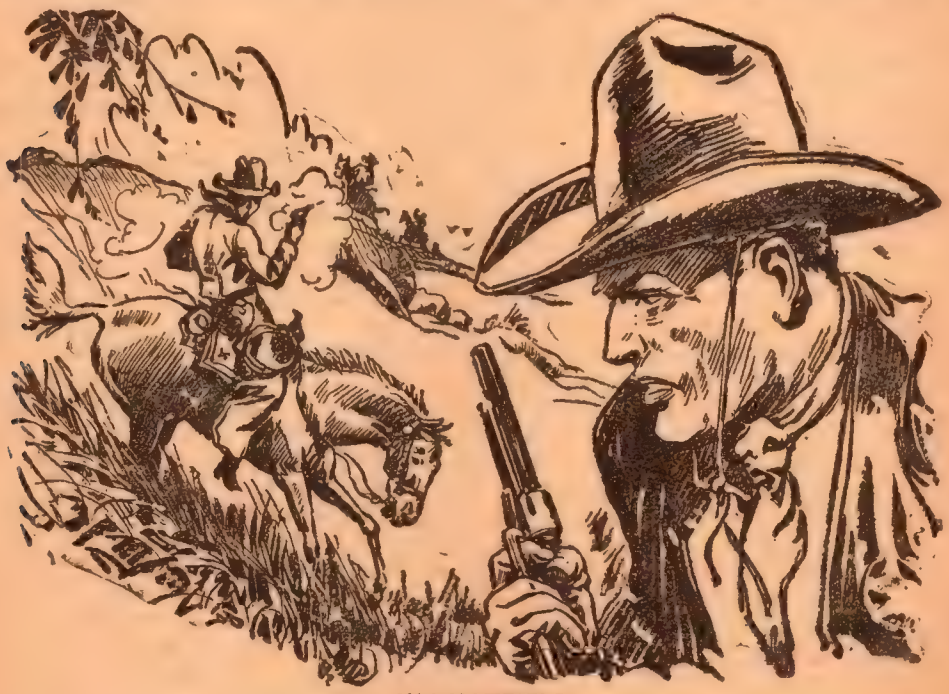
Tense with interest, Hatfield watched the race. He saw white puffs mushroom from the ranks of the men to the north. A little later, answering puffs stained the air to the south.

"Range too great for anything like accurate shooting, though," Hatfield muttered, bending forward in his saddle, his muscles rigid with excitement.

The men to the south reached the curve of the hill slopes first, veered around it and disappeared from view. The pursuers, still shooting, skalleyhooted after them, and in turn vanished from sight.

Hatfield relaxed. He shook his black head. The thing was beyond words. It just naturally didn't make sense.

"What in blazes is the meaning of all this?" he finally demanded. "Why should some jiggers shove a big bunch of cows into the river to drown in that canyon? I've a notion the cows belonged to the second bunch that came along gunning for the first ones. They 'peared plenty riled, all right. Wonder if they caught up with the hellions? Don't think so, though. The fellers in front had a good head start when they swerved around the hills. Reckon they'll get in the clear as soon as it's dark, and that isn't far off. What *is* going on in this section, anyhow? Well, I've a notion it will stand a mite of looking into."



JIM HATFIELD

FOR another moment he sat his horse on the ridge crest, a striking figure outlined against the blaze of the western sky.

Very tall, much more than six feet, broad of shoulder, deep of chest, lean of waist and hips, Hatfield's girth matched his height. His face was deeply bronzed and lean. The upward quirking of the cor-

ners of his rather wide mouth somewhat modified the tinge of fierceness evinced by the prominent high-bridged nose above and the long powerful chin beneath. The hair showing beneath his pushed back "J.B." was thick, and black. The arresting face was dominated by the long, black-lashed eyes of a peculiar shade of green set beneath heavy black brows.

With a word, he sent the great golden sorrel down the slope at a fast pace. Upon reaching the river, he found that the trail led to a ford. The water hardly came to Goldy's knees.

But the current ran very swiftly, swirling the water around the sorrel's legs and throwing up little flickers of foam.

Hatfield glanced toward the canyon mouth, and shook his head.

"Poor critters never had a chance," he remarked, apropos of the cattle. "Must run like a millrace in there, and I wouldn't be surprised if there are rapids farther along. One hell of a thing to do to a bunch of cows. Those hellions that shoved them in must be plenty snake-blooded. I've a notion this is a sort of salty section, all right. Well, that's what Captain McDowell said when he headed us over this way."

For several miles, to a little past where Hatfield had first noticed the dust cloud boiling into the sky, the trail traversed the level rangeland with the luxuriant grass the sole vegetation. Then it wound between groves and thickets and finally entered a considerable belt of chaparral. And here Hatfield found grisly evidence that the section really was salty.

At the beginning of the chaparral, the trail forked, the lesser branch veering east with a slight southerly trend. The more traveled track continued north by east. Pulling Goldy to a halt, Hatfield considered the two forks. He rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of one hand and smoked thoughtfully for some little while.

"I've a notion this left-hand track heads for that town we were told about," he remarked to the sorrel. "So I reckon we might as well amble along that way. Be dark before long and we could both stand a surroundin' of chuck. You been doing pretty well, you old grass burner, but I'm not like Nebuchadnezzar. I can't live on grass. That requires a specal dispensation of Providence and plumb out of the ordinary digestive organs. Nope, my stomach just isn't built that way. I hanker for a helpin' of broiled cow or some hog hip and cackleberries. Don't know how far we got to go, so let's get started."

HE carefully pinched out his cigarette butt and cast it aside. Then he sent Goldy along the north fork of the trail. For perhaps a quarter of a mile he rode through the growth, which was becoming shadowy. Then he abruptly jerked Goldy to a halt, with an exclamation.

At the edge of the growth stood a tall tree, one great branch stretching across the track. And from this branch, a rope around his neck, dangled the body of a man.

Hatfield's scalp prickled. He felt the palms of his hands moisten. A dead man is seldom a pretty sight, a hanged man, never.

His eyes narrowed, Hatfield moved Goldy closer and looked over the body with care. He noted several surprising things about the dead man. He was about to dismount for an even more thorough inspection when Goldy suddenly pricked his ears. Hatfield also listened.

From somewhere ahead sounded a patter of hoofs.

Hatfield considered an instant, then backed Goldy into the brush until horse and rider were invisible from the trail. The stern Lieutenant of Texas Rangers knew that it was not good judgment for a stranger in a section to be found beside a slain man. Also, there was no telling who the approaching horsemen might be. Not knowing themselves observed, they might reveal some valuable information.

Hardly had Hatfield reached a point of concealment when his keen ears detected a mutter of sounds approaching from the south. Hoof-beats again.

"This is getting interesting," he told himself. He slid from the saddle and took up a position where he could peer through the fringe of growth.

Around the bend to the north bulged some six or seven horsemen. They sighted the dangling body and jerked their mounts to a halt, with a volley of exclamations. One, a lanky, grizzled old man with a bristling mustache rode forward a pace.

"By gosh!" he swore. "It's Clem Buster

Over the lip went the leaders, shoved ahead by the charging mass behind (CHAP. 1)

of the Bradded R!"

His companions moved forward, exclaiming. And around the bend to the south swept another band of horsemen, nearly a dozen. They likewise jerked their horses to a halt and sat staring.

Riding slightly in advance of the others was a short, broad, powerfully built man with long, powerful looking arms. He was a very ugly man with a big nose covered with excrescences, thick lips, a long, blue chin and high cheek bones. His black eyes glinted in the shadow of his low-drawn hatbrim. He peered at the body with outthrust neck. His face darkened with anger and his gaze flickered to the group of horsemen clustered near the death tree.

"You blankety-blank murderin' sidewinders!" he roared.

Instantly there was a clutching of weapons on each side. But before anybody could clear leather, a voice rolled in thunder from the growth that flanked the trail—"Hold it! You're covered! Elevate, pronto!"

CHAPTER II

Range War

THE horsemen jerked as if touched by hot irons. "Elevate!" the voice repeated, in tones that demanded obedience. An ominous double clicking of drawn-back gun hammers emphasized the command.

Muttering curses, the riders obeyed, glaring at the shadowy growth.

Hatfield stepped into view, a long-barreled gun in each hand, clamped against his sinewy hips, the black muzzles flaring out to cover both groups.

"Careful, fellers," the old man instantly cautioned. "A jigger who fans his irons out sideways like that don't miss.

"Who the hell are you, and what do yuh want?" he demanded, raising his voice.

Hatfield supplied his name. "Don't want anything," he added, "except to keep you fellers from making darn fools of yourselves and going in for some needless gunning. I happened to get here before either of you, and that jigger was hanging there when I showed. So don't go off half-cocked and accuse one another of cashing him in till you know what you're talking about."

The old man leaned forward, peering at Hatfield. "Yuh mean that?" he demanded.

"You heard me say it."

The old man, his hands stiffly above his head, turned his gaze to the big leader of the opposing group.

"Hear that, Rawlins?" he said. "I figger this feller is tellin' the truth."

"Reckon he is," the other admitted grudgingly, his voice a deep lion's growl. "But I wouldn't put it past you hellions doin' it if yuh got the chance, Skelton."

"Listen, you!" bawled the oldster, his mustache bristling in his scarlet face. "Some day you'll go too dad-blamed far!"

"I'll go all the way when I do," the other instantly countered. "I want to tell yuh—"

"Hold it!" Hatfield thundered. "I don't know what this is all about, but it sure sounds loco to me. Now listen," he jerked his right-hand gun toward the old man, "you fellers turn about and high-tail back the way yuh come. Don't stop in a hurry, either. These hoglegs carry quite a ways, and I got good ears. And they aren't all—Goldy!"

There was a crackling in the brush and the great sorrel moved into view and halted directly behind his master.

"That saddle gun there in the boot is point-blank up to three hundred yards, and sighted for fifteen hundred," Hatfield remarked with meaning. "Get going. You other fellers stay put."

"Feller, yuh're pullin' this mighty high-handed," the old man growled. But just the same, his face showed relief.

"Get going," Hatfield repeated. "Let your hands down easy, and high-tail."

The horsemen obeyed. Hatfield noted grins flickering across the faces of several of the young cowhands who rode with Skelton.

The hoofs clicked out of sight and continued clicking until they faded into the distance.

"Say, feller," the big-nosed man, Rawlins, said plaintively, "Can't we put our hands down? This is gettin' mighty uncomfortable. Give yuh my word we won't try to pull anythin'."

Hatfield shot him a keen glance. "Reckon your word is good enough for me," he said, and holstered his guns.

The other lowered his hands with a sigh of relief. A grin widened his thick lips, revealing strong, crooked teeth that were very white. He nodded to the Lone Wolf.

"Reckon I'll say much obliged for everybody," he remarked. "If it wasn't for you, some of us wouldn't be in a position to say anythin'. Raines Skelton and his bunch may be snake-blooded hellions, but they're plenty salty."

Hatfield nodded. He had already arrived at the same conclusion, that is concerning the saltiness of Skelton and his riders. He reserved judgment on the first part of Rawlins' statement.

"You know the jigger there on the tree?" he asked.

Rawlins' face darkened. "It's Clem Buster, one of my hands," he said. "Yuh sure, feller, them sidewinders weren't holed up just around the bend when you showed?"

"Gather yuh mean they had just hung Clem," Hatfield interpreted the remark. "Well, if they did, they sure put in a lot of time around that bend. Besides, the poor jigger didn't die by hanging."

"What! He's on a rope around his neck, ain't he? And he sure ain't standin' on anythin' but air."

"That's right," Hatfield admitted, "but take a look at the rope. You'll notice the flesh of his neck isn't swollen around it. And see that stain on the left breast of his shirt. And if you look real close, you'll see there's a hole in the middle of the stain. That stain is dried blood. The poor feller was shot to death—drilled dead center—several hours ago. His dead body was hanged."

With an exclamation, Rawlins slid from his hull and strode forward.

"Blankety-blank it, you're right!" he swore. "Say, them eyes of yours don't miss anythin'."

He reached out gingerly and touched the dead man's leg. "Uh-huh, stiff already," he growled. He fingered his long chin, with thick, stubby fingers.

"And if you're able to backtrack the moves of Skelton and his bunch, you may be able to establish for sure they couldn't have had anything to do with the killing and hanging," Hatfield remarked.

Rawlins continued to finger his chin. "Town isn't more than twenty minutes ride, by the trail," he observed, as if talking to himself. "Chances are Skelton left town and headed back to his spread, which is by way of the east fork of the trail, back a little ways. If we find out he was in town for quite a spell, as I reckon he would be, that would put him and his bunch in the clear, all right. That is, the bunch he had with him. Plenty more Forked S hands than them you saw. We're just back from tryin' to run down some of the hellions that lifted a herd off my spread. They got into the hills before we could drop a loop on 'em, and give us the slip."

"Did they get the cows into the hills, too?" Hatfield asked casually.

RAWLINS swore viciously before replying. "No," he said. "They did with the cows what they've done before. Shoved 'em into Mist River to drown. They ain't wideloopers—got plenty beef of their own. Just plumb ornery."

"Shoved 'em in the river to drown? Doesn't seem to make sense," Hatfield commented.

"No?" Rawlins replied sarcastically. "Well, it'll make more sense to yuh after yuh learn somethin' of what's goin' on in this section. Clean a feller's spread of cows and he's out of business, ain't he?"

"Usually," Hatfield admitted, "unless he can get more cows."

"Cows cost money, and if yuh haven't got it, yuh don't get 'em, that is without a slick iron and a wide loop," Rawlins growled. "Skelton and his sidekicks know that. They aim to run me out of the section, that's all."

"Why?" Hatfield asked.

" 'Cause I'm a newcomer here and they don't like newcomers," Rawlins replied. "They been here since Noah shoved the first cow out of the Ark. Been runnin' things their way so long they figger to own this whole end of the state. They're plumb ornery and won't stop at anythin'."

He gestured significantly toward the dangling body as he spoke.

Hatfield nodded. He was not ready to comment until he learned more.

"Reckon we might as well ride on to town," Rawlins decided. "No, boys, we won't cut poor Buster down. Leave him for the sheriff and the coroner to see. Not that it'll do him or us any good. The

sheriff is tight-looped with Skelton. Come on, let's go."

He mounted his horse and gathered up the reins. Hatfield would have preferred less chance of a meeting in town between the two outfits, but he couldn't very well tell folks where and how to ride on an open trail.

"Ride along with you, if you don't mind," he said to Rawlins. "Feel the need of a mite of chuck."

"Sure, come along," Rawlins said. "Plenty of good eatin' places in Crater. Reckon the Deuces Up is about as good as any. Sell purty good likker there, too, and the games are as straight as any."

As they rode the trail, Hatfield at Rawlins' stirrup, he covertly studied the Bradded R owner. Rawlins had the look of a hard man. His tight jaw and the quick glitter of his black eyes said unmistakably that he was. He looked intelligent, too.

"And stubborn as a blue-nosed mule," Hatfield decided.

The Bradded R riders, a silent bunch, also had the appearance of being cold propositions. Hatfield knew that the taciturn riders were giving him a careful once-over and arriving at conclusions. He hoped that an alibi would be speedily proven, in town, for Skelton and his bunch. Otherwise the thought might come to some of these efficient looking hands that he, Hatfield, might be in cahoots with Skelton and planted in the brush to provide an alibi for the Forked S outfit when they heard the approach of the Bradded R men, who outnumbered them nearly two to one.

THE sun had set before they reached the cow and mining town of Crater. The western sky was a glory of scarlet and of gold, while the east stretched an infinity of purple and mauve as storm clouds climbed the long slant of the heavens. Through the deepening blue dusk, the lights of Crater were yellow stars against a sky of shadows. They outlined to squares and rectangles of saffron as the horses' iron beat the dust of the crooked main street.

At corners, lanterns hung on poles added their flicker of illumination to the golden bars streaming through windows or over the swinging doors of the saloons. Boot heels drummed the board sidewalks. There was a babble of talk, a bawling of song, or what was intended for it, the thrum of guitars, the whine of fiddles, the tapping of feet on dance floors. The clink of bottle necks on glasses, the rattle and whirr of roulette wheels and the cheerful chink of gold pieces on the "mahogany" provided sprightly overtones to the other sounds of revelry.

"Looks to be quite a town," Hatfield commented to Rawlins.

"Uh-huh, she is," the cowman agreed. "Smells purty strong of whiskey, tobacco and general hell raisin'. Good chance of sniffin' powder smoke most any night, too. Well, there's the Deuces Up right ahead. Figger we'll stop off there for a spell. You might as well, too, if yuh hanker for to eat."

"Want to find a place for my horse, first," Hatfield said.

"Right around this corner, here," Rawlins replied. "Good stable. I'll lead yuh to it. We'll hitch our jugheads at the rack. Be ridin' on to the spread before long. Go ahead, you fellers, while I show Hatfield the stable. Be with yuh in a minute."

"Aimin' to coil your twine hereabouts for a spell?" Rawlins asked as they turned into the alley.

"Depends," Hatfield replied. "Looks like an interesting section."

"I reckon some folks might find a rattlesnake den interestin'. No accountin' for tastes," Rawlins commented disgustedly. "It is good cow-country, though; and the mines in the hills down to the southeast are puttin' plenty of money into the section, and that makes things lively. If yuh hanker for a job of ridin', well, I'll talk to yuh later. Here's the stable."

After obtaining suitable quarters for Goldy and a room over the stalls for Hatfield, they repaired to the saloon. Hatfield at once sought out a table and ordered a meal. Rawlins went to the bar, and engaged the bartender in conversation. A little later he sauntered over to Hatfield's table.

"You were right, feller," he said. "I found out that Skelton and his bunch were in town all afternoon. They couldn't have had anythin' to do with what happened down the trail, or with wideloopin' and drownin' them cows, either. But there's about thirty more of the hellions swallerforkin' around on the Forked S, so

it don't mean much. Reckon there were plenty of 'em loose to do for Buster."

"Any notion where Buster was this afternoon?" Hatfield asked.

"Supposed to be on my southwest pasture where the cows were run from," Rawlins replied. "Reckon he spotted the rustlers there and they did for him. What puzzles me is why in blazes did they pack him over to that thicket and string him up? Don't seem to make sense. Just plumb orn'riness, I reckon."

HATFIELD was ready to agree on that, on the surface at least, the thing didn't make sense. But he felt certain that it was no mere whim on the part of the men who killed Buster. He was convinced that there was a motive, doubtless a subtle and sinister one, back of the apparently wanton act.

"I'm goin' to look up the sheriff and tell him what happened," Rawlins announced. "Be here when I get back?"

Hatfield nodded, and began eating.

Rawlins was back soon. With him was a rotund, jovial looking individual who was introduced as John Dwyer, the sheriff of the county.

Sheriff Dwyer was serious enough, however, when he questioned Hatfield about his finding of Clem Buster's body. He shook his head sadly and there was a worried look in his faded blue eyes.

"Don't know what the section's comin' to," he said. "Gettin' worse all the time. Been bad around here for the past six months. Never used to be that way."

Hatfield saw Rawlins' thick lips tighten a little, but the Bradded R owner made no remark.

"I'll drive down there with a buckboard first thing in the morning," continued the sheriff. "I'll take Doc Cooper, the coroner, with me. We'll bring Buster's body back. Reckon Doc will want to hold an inquest."

"And bring in a verdict sayin' Buster met his death at the hands of parties unknown, like he said about my night hawk, Turner, who was cashed in when the herd was run off my east range last month," Rawlins commented sarcastically.

The sheriff flushed slightly. "What else could Doc do?" he asked. "Nobody saw Turner killed, any more'n they saw Buster did for. That is, nobody we know anythin' about."

"Looks like somebody might try to find out somethin' about somebody," Rawlins grunted, complicatedly.

"That's unjust, Bert, and you know it," the sheriff replied quietly.

"Well, mebbe it is," Rawlins grudgingly admitted, "but yuh can't blame me for gettin' a mite riled. Remember, I've lost hundreds of cows and two tophands in the past three months."

"Skelton has lost cows, and so have other folks," said the sheriff.

"That's what he says," growled Rawlins.

"He has as much right to be believed as you have," replied Dwyer.

Rawlins shoved his hat back and scratched his bristling red head.

"Looks like we ain't gettin' nowhere," he said. "Well, I'm headin' back to the spread. Skelton and his hellions are in town and there ain't no sense in buckin' into trouble. Which is liable to happen if everybody gets likkered up."

"That's showin' savvy," the sheriff agreed in relieved tones. "You'll be in town tomorrow, of course?"

"Uh-huh," Rawlins replied. "See yuh tomorrow, Hatfield. Reckon you'll be here, all right."

"We'll want him at the inquest," said the sheriff. He glanced questioningly at Hatfield.

The Lone Wolf nodded.

Rawlins rose to his feet. The sheriff also prepared to depart. They left the saloon together.

CHAPTER III

Shot From the Dark

SHORTLY after Hatfield finished eating and was enjoying a leisurely cigarette, old Raines Skelton stalked in. He glanced about, met Hatfield's eyes, and frowned. He hesitated, apparently undecided as to just what course to pursue.

Hatfield smiled, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face, his green eyes crinkling at the corners, making his stern face wonderfully pleasant. Men, and women, always found that smile irresistible. Skelton tried to glower, but grinned instead. He walked over to Hat-

field's table and plumped into a vacant chair.

"Well," he growled truculently, "did yuh sign up with Bert Rawlins?"

Hatfield continued to smile. "Don't rec'lect him asking me to," he replied.

"Well," Skelton growled again, "he must be slippin'. Always makes it a point to hire every gun-slingin' hellion what happens along. Reckon yuh don't talk as salty as yuh 'peared to be out there on the trail, or he wouldn't have missed the bet. Yuh figger to coil your twine in this section?"

"Depends," Hatfield replied. "I don't hanker to take sides in a local ruckus I don't know anything about, if that's what you're getting at."

"Then I reckon yuh better sign up with Pres Morton and the Bar M," Skelton snorted. "He's about the only jigger hereabouts, except old Tol Truxton of the Lucky Seven, what don't figger himself in this row. Pres says he don't see why folks can't get along together, no matter who they are or where they come from."

"Sounds like good sense," Hatfield replied. "Just why are you so on the prod against Rawlins?"

"This section was plumb peaceful till that bird showed here, about six months back," Skelton retorted.

"Meaning you figure he's responsible for what's been happening?"

"Well," Skelton replied belligerently, "it's mighty funny, when we hadn't had any rustlin' or robbin' or killin' for a long spell, and then they begin right after he

comes here and takes over the Bradded R. I been losin' cows, plenty, and so has other folks."

"Rawlins says he's been losing cows, too," Hatfield countered. "Had them shoved in the river and drowned, like that bunch today he told me of. 'Pears to me he knows what he's talking about, on that score, anyhow."

"Yuh mean to say yuh believe that Rawlins really lost cows that way?" Skelton demanded incredulously.

Caught between two fires, the outlaws broke in panic (CHAP. XIII)

"I am not accustomed to dissemble my beliefs," Hatfield replied quietly. "In fact, I know somebody lost cows that way today. I saw it happen."

Old Raines Skelton stared. He shook his grizzled head. "You talk like yuh're lyin', but yuh look like yuh ain't," he growled.

Hatfield did not resent the way the thing was said, understanding that Skelton was really paying him a compliment.

"I was on the crest of the ridge west of the river and saw it," he explained. "I was too far away to spot brands or faces, but I saw a bunch shove the cows into the water and then high-tail south and east around the hills. Another bunch skalleyhooted out of the brush to the north and chased 'em out of sight. According to what Rawlins told me, he and his men were that other bunch."

"Looks that way," Skelton admitted, a

worried expression shadowing his face. "Well, nobody can accuse me of bein' in on that. I was here in town all afternoon."

"Understand you have quite a few men riding for you," Hatfield remarked.

"Meanin' yuh think some of my boys might have been in on that?"

"I'm not saying anything like that," Hatfield replied, "but I do know that sometimes members of an outfit on the prod against another outfit get out of hand and do things on their own."

"Truth in that," Skelton admitted gloomily. His face hardened. "I know the boys are riled against Rawlins and his bunch," he said, "but if I find anybody workin' for me is responsible for drownin' a lot of poor beef critters, there'll be a housecleanin' on the Forked S that'll make an old maids' home in springtime look plumb mild!

"Not that I believe there is," he hastened to add. "I figger I know my boys, and nobody'll make me believe any of 'em would do a thing like that. I—"

He broke off to wave to a man who had just entered the room slapping the dust from his hat against his overalled leg.

"Here comes Pres Morton, now," Skelton said. "Set down and take a load off your feet, Pres, and know Jim Hatfield, who just got in town."

MORTON acknowledged the introduction, and sat down. He was a well set-up man of slightly above medium height with powerful looking shoulders. His face was rather broad across the cheek bones, which were low. His lips were peculiarly thin and straight. His eyes were clear gray and unwinking, his hair dark and inclined to curl. He had a soft, low voice and spoke like a man of some education.

Morton listened attentively as Skelton regaled him with an account of the day's happenings. He shook his head when the rancher had finished.

"You and Rawlins are headed for big trouble," he said. "You've got the makings of another Graham-Tewksbury war here. I know yuh have most of the cowmen of the section back of you, but Rawlins has about twenty salty hands riding for him, and he isn't without friends.

"He's a good spender and always ready to lend a helping hand to anybody who needs it. Folks down to the mines and here in town like him. Slade Gumbert thinks mighty high of Rawlins, and going up against Slade Gumbert isn't my notion of something nice."

"Agree with yuh on that," Skelton replied. "By the way, where is Gumbert? Haven't seen him around the place today."

"I passed him over to the livery stable a little while ago," Morton replied. "He was just putting his horse away. Been down to the mines, he said. He's got an interest in one down there, you know. Reckon he'll be here most any minute now."

"Gumbert owns the Deuces Up," Skelton explained to Hatfield, "And he's a cold proposition, though a nice enough feller so long as he ain't crossed."

Morton beckoned a waiter and ordered drinks. As they were consuming them, a man pushed through the swinging doors and crossed the room, with slow, effortless strides, to the far end of the bar.

"That's Gumbert," Skelton said in low tones to Hatfield.

Slade Gumbert was a very tall man, loose-jointed and slightly stooped. His face was lean almost to cadaverousness. He was blond as to hair and coloring with very pale blue eyes set deep in his head. His nose was long and straight and drooping at the tip above a wide, firm mouth. He wore a long black coat, now thickly powdered with dust. The swung-back skirts of the coat revealed heavy guns swinging low on his lanky thighs.

A bartender handed Gumbert a sheaf of papers. The saloonkeeper proceeded to look them over in a slow, methodical fashion. He nodded, reached for a bottle and a glass in the same unhurried fashion, and poured himself a drink.

"Gumbert never seems to move fast, no matter what he's doin'," observed Skelton.

"Reckon yuh never saw him pull a gun, then," Morton replied, with a slight smile.

"You never did, either," Skelton retorted. "Nobody ever did. A gun just happens in Slade Gumbert's hand. Fastest gun slinger in Texas, I reckon, if not in the whole southwest, and he never misses."

"Can't say I ever saw a faster," Morton admitted, "but I've heard tell of a feller who, if he's what folks say about him,

might give Gumbert a hustle."

"Who?" Skelton demanded incredulously.

"A big feller over in northwest Texas," Morton replied. "I never saw him, but I've heard tell of him. Goes by a sort of funny name—The Lone Wolf. One of Bill McDowell's Rangers, his Lieutenant, I've been told. The things folks who have seen him in action say about him sound plumb loco."

"Well, I figger he'd be plumb loco, no matter who he is, if he went up against Gumbert," Skelton grunted. "But I reckon that ain't liable to happen. Gumbert is law abidin', so far as anybody ever heard."

"Reckon that's right," Morton agreed. "Never been anythin' else, so far as anybody knows, during the year he's been here."

HATFIELD'S lips twitched slightly. couldn't help but be amused at this manifestation of the prevailing suspicion entertained by the average cowman for a saloonkeeper and gambler. That Slade Gumbert was a gambler, or had once been one, Hatfield had no doubt. His dress and general appearance evidenced that. Skelton's next remark confirmed his conclusion.

"Gumbert is nigh as handy with a deck of cards as he is with a gun," the Forked S owner said. "Watched him do some tricks the other night. He made them pasteboards do most everything but yelp out loud."

Morton nodded. "But he never sets in a game, yuh'll notice," he remarked. "Never seems to do much of anything like other folks. Sometimes I get the notion he ain't human. About the only thing he ever does to make him 'pear ordinary is whistle."

"Whistle?"

"Uh-huh, almost always when he's doin' somethin'," Morton replied. "Real soft and low, and does a good job of it. About the only jigger I ever heard who could make a whistle sound like music. But the things he whistles! Give yuh the creeps to listen to 'em much."

"That's right," agreed Skelton. "I've listened to him. Queer soundin' things that make yuh feel sort of crawly under your skin. They get yuh. Reminds me of Yaqui drums beatin' back in the hills on a moonlight night. I've heard them, down in *manana* land, and the tunes Gumbert whistles makes me think of 'em. Has the same sort of a beat to 'em. Not that they sound bad, but yuh get a notion they don't belong to civilized folks."

Hatfield listened to Skelton's ruminations concerning Slade Gumbert's musical leanings with interest. He glanced toward the saloonkeeper busy over his accounts, and saw that Gumbert's lips were pursed.

Jim Hatfield possessed very keen hearing, and while the others talked, he listened intently, his black brows drawing together. He favored Gumbert with a contemplative glance and abruptly his lips twitched slightly and a light of understanding glowed in his eyes.

Morton finished his drink and stood up.

"Crave a mite of shuteye," he said. "Be seein' yuh tomorrow, Skelton. Hope to see you again soon, too, Hatfield."

He waved his hand to Slade Gumbert and left the room. Skelton gazed after him.

"Nice feller, Pres," he remarked. "Knows the cow business and been around quite a mite. Was over Arizona way, and in California, and over East for a spell. When his Uncle, old Caswell Morton, died, Pres came into the Bar M, last year. Showed up just before Caswell cashed in his checks.

"He and old Cas never got along over well, but he was the only kin the old man had. Cas was sort of old-fashioned and didn't take well to new notions, like Pres had.

"Pres has done better with the spread than Cas ever did, though. Well, I reckon I'll be headin' back for my place. Sent the boys along before I came in. Didn't want them to get mixed up with Rawlins and his bunch. They been in here?"

"Rawlins was," Slade replied. "Said he and his men were headed for home. That was a while before you came in."

"Best place for him," grunted Skelton, rising to his feet.

Hatfield also stood up. "Figure I'll go to bed," he said. "Didn't get over much sleep last night."

"Where yuh stayin'?" Skelton asked.

"Got a room over the stalls in the livery stable around the corner," Hatfield told him.

"Good place," said Skelton. "Old Bart has clean beds and no bugs, which is more'n yuh can say for most places in this pueblo. Wait a minute and I'll walk with yuh. Want to see Gumbert before I leave."

HE walked to the end of the bar and engaged the saloonkeeper in conversation. Both spoke in low tones, and although they did not glance in his direction, Hatfield had a pretty good notion that he was the subject under discussion, but he gave no sign.

"Okay," Skelton said a minute later, "let's go."

As they left the saloon together, Skelton chuckled.

"I asked Slade what he thought of yuh, Hatfield," he said frankly. "Usually trust his judgment in folks. Bet yuh couldn't guess what he said, not that he said it a mean way, mind yuh. He said just two words, but that's a good deal for Slade Gumbert."

"What were they?" Hatfield asked, with a smile.

Skelton chuckled again. "Plumb pizen!"

Hatfield laughed aloud, but otherwise did not comment. With Skelton still chuckling over Gumbert's laconic observation, they walked up the street to the alley housing the livery stable. They reached the dark mouth of the lane. Hatfield half turned; then with a movement too swift for the eye to follow, he hurled Skelton to the ground, at the same instant going sideways and down himself.

A stream of fire gushed from the alley mouth. The buildings rocked to the roar of a gunshot. A slug whined angrily over Skelton's prostrate form. A second fanned Hatfield's face with its lethal breath. Then both of the Lone Wolf's guns let go with a rattling crash. Hatfield rolled over, scuttled sideways and again the long Colts streamed fire.

And despite the storm of lead raking it from side to side, still a third shot boomed from the alley.

Hatfield felt the result of that one. It hit the ground right in front of him and stung his face and filled his eyes with gravel and dust. With an oath, he slewed aside and fired blindly until the hammers of his guns clicked on empty cartridges.

Skelton had got some breath back into his lungs and was shooting also, and bellowing curses.

"Hold it!" Hatfield shouted, blinking to clear his vision. "We either got him already or he high-tailed. Listen!"

Skelton ceased firing and they strained their ears. Hatfield thought he heard a patter of swift feet far down the alley, but because his head was still ringing from the roar of his own guns, he could not be sure. He stuffed fresh cartridges into the cylinders of his Colts.

"You stay here," he told Skelton, and went zigzagging into the darkness of the narrow lane.

NOTHING happened. He could see nothing in the blackness between the buildings, and when he paused an instant, the only thing he heard was Skelton pounding toward him, still swearing. That and distant shouts from somebody who had heard the shooting.

"He's gone," Hatfield said, "if he isn't on the ground somewhere in here, and I don't think he is. Why didn't you stay back there as I told you?"

"Stay back there!" Skelton bawled indignantly. "Think I'm going to let somebody else do my fightin' for me. Let's see if we can find the sidewinder."

They started forward again, cautiously, to halt as a voice said from the darkness.

"That'll be far enough, gents!" An ominous double-click emphasized the warning.

Hatfield's guns jutted forward, but Skelton recognized the voice.

"Uncock that old baseburner, Bart!" he shouted. "Do yuh want to blow a buildin' down. It's Raines Skelton. Fetch a lantern."

There was a grumbling of oaths and the sound of shuffling feet. A moment later the old stable keeper stumped from the open door, the lantern in one hand and a cocked six-gauge, double-barreled shotgun in the other. The muzzles, that looked about the size of nail kegs, were jerking in all directions.

"Put them hammers down!" barked Skelton. "If that thing lets go there won't be enough left of anybody for a buryin'. Put 'em down, I say!"

Old Bart obediently uncocked the huge weapon. Skelton ducked wildly as the barrels lined directly with him during the process.

"He's cross-eyed, too," he told Hatfield. "Yuh never know which way he's lookin'. Don't think he knows himself. Hand me that lantern, Bart, and keep them muzzles down."

A careful search of the alley revealed no trace of the would-be drygulcher.

"But he'd have got me if it hadn't been for you, Hatfield," Skelton declared. "I won't forget it. Well, I'm headin' for home before some other Bradded R hellion comes gunnin' for me. This section ain't never goin' to know any peace till them sidewinders are run plumb out of it."

Grumbling curses under his mustache, he headed back up the street to where his horse was hitched. Hatfield shook his head after him, and explained to old Bart what had happened.

BEFORE going to bed, Hatfield cleaned and oiled his guns.

As is often a habit with men who ride much alone, he talked to the big Colts as he would to his horse.

"Things are getting interesting in a hurry," he told them. "Skelton figures that drygulchin' gent was after him, but he didn't stop to think that it was chance that he, Skelton, walked to the alley mouth with me. He wouldn't have done it if he hadn't been talking about what Slade Gumbert had to say to me. Now certain folks know I aimed to hole up in old Bart's stable tonight and would be along this way sooner or later. Beginning to look like somebody is taking a mite more than casual interest in me. Who? Well, that's a question. I sort of riled a couple of outfits today, and maybe somebody in one bunch or the other was a mite more riled than he let on to be. Must have been put considerable on the prod to go in for a try at a snake-blooded killing from the dark. And, so far as I could judge, none of those jiggers looked just that sort. Can't tell, though. Some folks are good at hiding their real feelings. But it sure looks funny. Looks like somebody or several somebodies might know a mite more about me than they're letting on. Which is liable to make things more than a mite interesting for me, if it happens to be so. Well, maybe we'll find out about that later.

"If not too late," he added grimly, and went to bed.

CHAPTER IV

Marshal of Crater

HATFIELD arose early the next morning. He ate breakfast at the Deuces Up and then located the sheriff's office, which fronted the county jail. He found the sheriff at his desk, beside him the coroner.

Cooper was a white whiskered old frontier doctor with keen blue eyes. He started visibly when Hatfield entered the room, but said nothing.

The sheriff glanced up inquiringly, and greeted Jim Hatfield with a wave of his hand.

"Was just thinking, suh, seeing as I was the one who found him, that I'd like to ride up there with you when you go for Buster's body."

"Don't reckon there's any objections to that, Hatfield," said the sheriff. "Meet Doc Cooper, the coroner. Doc's goin' along, too."

Hatfield shook hands with Cooper. The sheriff closed a drawer of his desk and rose to his feet.

"Reckon we might as well be movin'," he said. "I'll go hitch up. You fellers can get ready. I'll meet yuh here in front of the office.

A little later the buckboard trundled out of Crater on its grisly errand. Doc Cooper sat on the seat beside the sheriff. Hatfield forked Goldy.

"I've dreamed about horses like that, but never expected to see one," the sheriff remarked admiringly, running his eyes over the great sorrel.

"Old Goldy will do, I reckon," Hatfield agreed.

"Don't often see a golden sorrel like that with a jet-black mane and tail," the sheriff commented. "Usually they're a mite off-colored. Nigh to eighteen hands high, isn't he? Sure got a look of speed, too. Doc, he even tops Pres Morton's roan, and I didn't think there was a finer horse than that roan in all Texas."

In a little less than an hour the buckboard swerved around the bend north of the spot where Hatfield discovered Clem Buster's hanged corpse. Sheriff

John Dwyer leaned forward, peering ahead. Abruptly he barked an oath and jerked his horse to a rearing halt. Hatfield likewise pulled up. Wordless, the three sat staring toward the great tree branch extending across the shadowy trail. Sheriff Dwyer broke the silence.

"G-good gosh!" he stuttered. "There—there's two of 'em!"

Dwyer was right. Beside Clem Buster's corpse, a second body swung at the end of a noosed rope.

Sheriff Dwyer sent his horses charging forward. He pulled up again beneath the tree, stared with dilated eyes.

"It's—it's Bob Hawley of the Forked S!" he gulped.

Again the three men stared wordless at the body swinging gently in the breeze. Hawley was a fair-haired young fellow of medium size. Between his bulging eyes was a small blue hole.

Doc Cooper scrambled to the ground and moved closer. "Killed by a gunshot wound, and his body noosed up quite a while later," was his verdict.

"The same as Buster," Hatfield commented.

Doc Cooper shook his white head. "Dwyer," he said to the sheriff, "there'll be hell over this. Raines Skelton will swear the Bradded R bunch did it to even up for Clem Buster. And who can blame him! I calc'late yuh got a cattle war on your hands."

The sheriff swore explosively, including both the Forked S and the Bradded R in his vituperations. He shook his fist at the silent growth. Then abruptly he cooled.

"I'll hitch the horses and then we'll cut 'em down," he said.

Meanwhile, Jim Hatfield had been staring intently toward the swinging bodies. As Dwyer strode off to find a convenient trunk for hitching, Hatfield moved close to the coroner.

"Doc," he said in low tones, "take charge of those two ropes. Don't let them out of your hands. I'll tell you why later."

"Okay, Jim," Cooper agreed. "If you say to do it, there must be a good reason."

"There is," Hatfield replied briefly.

Having tied the team, the sheriff returned. Hatfield swarmed up the tree trunk, hitched his way out onto the overhanging branch and loosened the knots that secured the ropes to the limb. He gently lowered the bodies to the ground. Dwyer and Cooper carried them to the buckboard and deposited them in the bed. Hatfield walked about under the tree and eyed the ground intently.

"Doc," he asked as the coroner joined him again, "didn't it rain a little last night, right after dark?"

"That's right," Cooper replied. "Not over much, but sort of brisk for a few minutes. Why?"

"Right under the tree here, where the leaves are thin, are two different sets of boot tracks," Hatfield pointed out. "You'll notice they are both pitted by big rain drops. Don't forget that, Doc. It might be mighty important, later on. Rained right after dark, and I'm sure it didn't rain any more during the night. The stars were shining brightly when I went to bed, late. And there were no signs of later rain this morning. Don't forget, Doc," he repeated.

The old doctor shook his head. "Them eyes of yours don't miss nothin'," he muttered as Sheriff Dwyer approached. "I won't forget, Jim. I got the ropes, too."

As the grim procession rolled up to the coroner's office, silent men lined the main street of Crater. But when the second body was sighted, and identified, the crowd broke up into talking, gesticulating groups.

AFTER the bodies were disposed of, Sheriff Dwyer hurried back to his office to confer with his deputies. Hatfield lingered in the coroner's office. Doc Cooper shut and locked the door and sat down with Hatfield at his desk, upon which lay the two lengths of rope.

"McDowell send yuh over here, Jim?" Cooper asked.

"That's right," Hatfield nodded. "He got your letter and decided I'd better give the situation a once-over. Looks like you got the making of a first class cattle war here, Doc."

"We have," Cooper returned grimly. "When Raines Skelton hears of this, there won't be no holdin' him. And Rawlins is just as bad. He'll be ready for all the trouble Skelton can bring him, and before it's finished, the whole section will be mixed up in it. Another 'to the last man' ruckus in the makin', all right, if it

isn't stopped in a hurry. What about those ropes, Jim?"

"Doc," Hatfield replied slowly, "those two ropes are from the same piece. I'd say both came originally from a twenty-five-foot hair reata used for tethering or picketing. Whoever used it to hang Buster and Hawley cut it in two."

"Yuh're sure both pieces came from the same twine, Jim?"

"Absolutely," Hatfield replied. "This is a very unusual braid, Doc. See how the black and white hairs intertwine to form a peculiar pattern. Even if the cut ends didn't match, like they do, it would be mighty strange if two of these things showed up in the same section.

"I saw a couple of them once. Over to the State Prison. An inmate of the prison braided them and sold them to visitors. They were exhibited in the front office. He couldn't have made many of them—it's a long and tedious chore, fashioning a rope patterned like this one. I sure wish I had gotten a look at that jigger while I was at the warden's office, but of course I had no reason to, at the time."

"Mebbe he's there yet?" Doc remarked hopefully.

Hatfield shook his head. "No, not unless he went back on another charge, which I don't think is the case. The warden told me something about him when he showed me the ropes. I didn't pay much attention to what he said at the time, but I do remember that he said the jigger had served a couple of years and was about due to be released, with time off for good behavior. Wouldn't have been discussed if it hadn't been for the ropes. They encourage the inmates to put in their spare time making useful things, and the warden was proud of that feller's work.

"So you see, it's mighty unlikely that two of the things should show up here this way at the same time. Anyhow, the cut ends match perfectly to continue the pattern. Yes, Buster and Hawley, or their dead bodies, rather, were hanged with the same rope, presumably by the same person."

Doc Cooper gave a low whistle. "And what does that mean?" he asked.

"I'd sure like the answer to that one," Hatfield replied grimly.

"What about those boot marks yuh mentioned?" Cooper asked.

"Those boot marks were undoubtedly made by the men who hanged the bodies," Hatfield explained. "There were two sets, one under Buster's, the other under Hawley's. And both sets were made before the rain. It was less than an hour till dark when I run onto Buster's body. The rain fell right after dark. Which means that Hawley's body was hung there. Between the time when I rode north with Rawlins and his bunch and when the rain fell, only a short time after we reached town."

Doc Cooper looked bewildered.

"Don't you see it, Doc?" Hatfield asked. "Skelton proved conclusively that he couldn't have had anything to do with Buster's killing. Now Rawlins proves just as conclusively that he couldn't have had anything to do with the killing of Hawley. Rawlins didn't know anything about Buster's killing and the hanging of his body till we saw the body there on the trail. He rides to town with me, he and his bunch. And while they are riding to town, somebody snuks Hawley's body

[*Turn page*]

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over to that tree and hangs it beside Buster's."

"Mebbe some other members of Rawlins' outfit pulled the chore," hazarded Cooper. "He didn't have all his hands with him last night, I understand."

"I thought of that," Hatfield replied, "although the notion sure doesn't make sense—highly unlikely. But, if they did, how come they had half of the rope with which Buster's body was hanged?"

Doc Cooper threw out his hands. "I give up," he said. "You answer that one. It's your business to find out about things like this, and I've a notion yuh sure got work cut out for yuh this time."

"I'm inclined to agree with you there," Hatfield admitted ruefully.

"Yes, it looks like Rawlins and his bunch are in the clear where Hawley's killin' is concerned," continued Cooper, "but try and get Raines Skelton to believe that! Jim, there's bad trouble in the makin'!"

AFTER the coroner's inquest, at which the jury brought in a verdict that declared the deceased met their deaths at the hands of parties unknown, Crater remained tense as a hair-trigger. Discussions raged in the saloons, with occasional violent arguments. Men stood about the streets in low-talking groups. But Sheriff Dwyer and his deputies patrolled constantly and the day and the night following passed without serious incident. Nothing had been heard from either the Forked S or the Bradded R.

"They know what's happened before now, though," men said. "This ain't finished."

Jim Hatfield went to bed late and slept rather longer than usual. He was eating his breakfast in the Deuces Up when a wild-eyed man rushed in. The man had been pointed out to Hatfield, the day before, as Quent Maltby, the mayor of Crater.

Maltby glanced around the room, and spoke to Slade Gumbert, who was standing in his customary position at the far end of the bar.

"Slade," he exclaimed excitedly, "Bert Rawlins and the Bradded R bunch are in town. They're holed up in the Last Chance Saloon at the east end of Main Street, and they're loaded for bear. Raines Skelton and his Forked S outfit are headed for town to shoot it out with Rawlins. They'll be here any minute."

Gumbert remained his usual imperturbable self. "Well, what yuh botherin' me about it for?" he asked. "Go tell the sheriff and have him throw 'em all in the calaboose."

The sheriff ain't here!" Maltby sputtered. "He left town two hours back with his deputies. Pres Morton sent word there'd been a wideloopin' over to the Bar M and that he and his hands had the sidewinders holed up in White Horse Canyon. He sent to Dwyer for help in roundin' 'em up. John headed for the Bar M in a hurry. So I come to you."

"What in blazes do yuh want me to do about it?" demanded Gumbert. "I ain't no sheriff."

"No, but you're the only man I know of who can do anythin'," said the mayor. "We ain't had no town marshal since Sydenstricker resigned last week. I got the power to appoint somebody to fill the vacancy. I'm appointin' you marshal of Crater."

"Like heck yuh are!" growled Gumbert. "I ain't mixin' in this ruckus or takin' sides. I'm in business here and don't aim to tag tangled with my customers. Guess again, Maltby."

The mayor swore in helpless fury. "What in blazes am I goin' to do?" he demanded. "There'll be shootin's and killin's here in the next twenty minutes if somethin' ain't done. Who can I get to act? I ain't no gun fighter."

Slade Gumbert turned slowly and gestured toward the table where Jim Hatfield was just finishing his breakfast.

"There's the man yuh want," he said quietly. "Appoint him town marshal, and there won't be no ruckus."

MALTBY stared at Hatfield. "The feller who found Clem Buster's body and kept Raines Skelton from gettin' his head blowed off the same night," he muttered. "I don't know him, Gumbert."

"Yuh don't need to," Gumbert replied. "All yuh need to do is get him to take the chore."

"Blank it! I'll try anythin'," the mayor swore in desperation. He strode to Hatfield's table.

"What do yuh say, feller?" he asked.

"Will yuh take over the marshal's chore? Pays two hundred a month."

Hatfield finished his coffee with deliberation. He gazed at the excited mayor, his green eyes thoughtful, the concentration furrow deepening between his black brows. He set down his empty cup and rose to his feet.

"Yes," he said, "I'll take it, for today, anyhow."

Mayor Maltby's face brightened as his eyes ran over the Lone Wolf's towering form.

"Yuh sure size up big enough, anyhow," he said. "Here's the badge—got it right in my pocket. Pin it on your shirt. Anythin' else yuh want?"

"One thing," Hatfield replied. "But I'll take care of that. Skelton will come into town from the west, won't he?"

"That's right," answered the mayor. "Chances are they'll hitch their horses at the big rack over there by the corral and come ahead on foot. You'll hear 'em comin.' There are a lot of young fellers in Skelton's outfit and they'll be kickin' up plenty of racket."

Hatfield nodded. "Going over to the livery stable a minute," he said. "Be right back."

"Yuh'll do better on your feet," the mayor expostulated.

"I'm not going for my horse," Hatfield replied, and passed through the swinging doors.

"What in blazes does he want from the livery stable?" the mayor wondered.

"I dunno," said Gumbert, "but I'm willin' to bet that whatever it is will be bad hearin' for Skelton and his bunch."

The mayor was quite willing to agree with Gumbert's prophecy when Hatfield returned a few minutes later, for across his arm he carried old Bart's six gauge shotgun. He opened the breech and shoved two plump cartridges into the huge bore.

"About the only way a jigger can go up against a bunch of twenty-five or thirty packing sixes and hope for anything like an easy break is with a scattergun," Hatfield explained. "I've noticed that even a salty outfit don't over well like the taste of buckshot at close range."

"That thing had ought to be mounted on wheels," grunted Gumbert, eyeing the six-gauge askance.

In the distance sounded a stutter of shots.

"Here they come!" yelped Mayor Maltby. "Oh, Lord!"

A smile twitched Hatfield's lips. "You fellers stay here," he said, and sauntered out the door.

CHAPTER V

"Plumb Pizen"

THE shooting was swiftly drawing nearer. Hatfield could hear whoops and yells, and a moment later the patter of fast hoofs, still quite a way off. They slowed a few minutes later, then ceased altogether.

The shooting stopped, also.

"Reckon they're dismounting now," Hatfield told himself, and walked up the street to the alley upon which the livery stable fronted. He stepped into the narrow space between the flanking buildings, and waited.

The shooting and yelling resumed, closer now and steadily drawing nearer.

"Let 'em blaze away," Hatfield muttered. "By the time they get here, most of 'em will have empty guns in their hands."

Louder and louder sounded the uproar. Hatfield could hear boots thudding in the dust. He waited a moment longer, then stepped from the alley and faced the approaching Forked S cowboys. He swung the six-gauge around to cover the group.

"Halt!" he shouted. "Drop those guns and put up your hands!"

The group jostled to a standstill, staring in amazement. A scant half-dozen yards away the black shotgun muzzles yawned toward them, and behind those rock-steady muzzles were the terrible eyes of the Lone Wolf.

"Hatfield!" bawled Raines Skelton, who marched in the van. "What the blankety-blank you hornin' in on this for?"

The shotgun muzzles moved the merest trifle, to cover Skelton point-blank.

"I'll kill you, Skelton, if one of your men makes a move," Hatfield warned, his voice ringing like smitten steel. "You'll

never know what hit you. Get your hands up!"

The shotgun hammers clicked back to full cock as he spoke.

That was enough for Skelton. His hands shot skyward. "Get 'em up, boys," he yelped. "The devil means it!"

Thirty pairs of hands jerked into the air. Those holding guns let them thud on the ground.

Hatfield stepped a little to one side, the shotgun still trained on Raines Skelton.

"All right," he called. "Get going—right up the street—single file. And don't take any chances. This thing packs fourteen buckshot to the barrel, and it'll spray you like a hose. Move!"

They moved, cursing and muttering, hands pointing stiffly upward.

"Where yuh takin' us?" demanded Skelton.

"I'm taking you to jail," Hatfield told him. "Keep going!"

THE line shambled past, glaring murder, but making no threatening move. The black muzzles followed them like ominous twin shadows. Hatfield fell in behind, and still a little to one side, alert and watchful.

As the seething cowboys scuffed their high heels through the dust in front of the Deuces Up, a derisive yell sounded from the open door.

"Ho! Ho! ho!" bellowed Slade Gumbert. "Paint this one on your chuck wagons! Skelton, didn't I tell you he was pizen?"

"Come along, Gumbert," Hatfield called. "I want you. You, too, Mayor Maltby."

"Sartain," chuckled Gumbert as he fell in alongside the marching line. It did not make the Forked S bunch feel any better to note that Gumbert's black coat skirts were swung back and that his thumbs were hooked over his double cartridge belts.

In front of the sheriff's office, Hatfield halted the line.

"Face the wall," he ordered. "Gumbert, disarm those men."

Still chuckling, Gumbert strode forward. "I'm sort of hauled into this it seems, gents," he cheerfully told his victims, "so please don't do nothin' to make me nervous."

He plucked guns from holsters and tossed them across the street. Skelton was the last to be relieved of his hardware. He growled and muttered, but offered no resistance.

"Open the door, Maltby," Hatfield directed. "Go in and unlock the bull pen."

The mayor hurried into the office. Keys jingled. There was a creaking of hinges.

"Okay," he called.

"Inside gents," Hatfield ordered. "Keep right on moving."

Hatfield herded the last cursing cowboy through the office and slammed the iron door after him. The bull pen was packed to suffocation.

"We can't breathe in here!" howled Skelton.

"You should have thought of that before you started this row," Hatfield replied. "Think about it till I get back." He turned toward the outer door.

A big, hard-faced cowhand shook his fist through the bars.

"Feller, if yuh wasn't wearin' that marshal's badge!" he threatened.

Hatfield let his level gaze rest on the cowboy's anger convulsed face for a moment.

"Wait," he told him, and headed for the door.

"Where yuh goin'?" asked Mayor Maltby.

"To the Last Chance," Hatfield replied over his shoulder. "Understand there's another bunch down there that needs taking care of."

"Good gosh!" gulped the mayor. "Is he goin' to tackle the Bradded R gang, too?"

"Reckon he'll tackle anything," chuckled Gumbert. "Come on, Quent, let's go watch the fun down there."

Hatfield walked steadily down the street till he was opposite The Last Chance. The place was ominously quiet. He started across the street.

"That's far enough, Hatfield," a voice warned through the window. "Come any closer and we'll drop yuh!"

"And stretch rope, the lot of you," Hatfield instantly countered, tapping the badge on his breast. "You're bucking the Law, Rawlins, and you're not big enough to do that."

WITH the same unhurried stride he crossed the street. Nothing hap-

pened. He shoved through the swinging doors and glanced around the room. The Bradded R punchers stood in a compact group, hands on their guns. Hatfield surveyed them coldly over the barrels of his shotgun.

"All right," he told them. "Clear out of here, fork your broncs and get out of town, pronto!"

"Yuh think we're goin' to let Raines Skelton say he ran us out of town?" shouted Bert Rawlins.

"Want to see Skelton?" Hatfield asked.

"Yuh're blankety-blank right I want to see him," answered Rawlins.

"Then ride past the calaboose, and you'll see him peekin' through the bars," Hatfield said. "Now, get going. You've got ten seconds to clear this room. Anybody here when time's up will go into jail with the Forked S bunch, and it's almighty crowded in there already. Move!"

Bert Rawlins stared at Hatfield, his jaw sagging. He clamped it tight, shook his red head.

"Come on, boys," he said, very quietly. "We're headin' for home."

As the Bradded R punchers jostled through the swinging doors, the raucous laughter of Slade Gumbert boomed outside.

"Ho! ho! ho! Pizen! Plumb pizen!"

Hatfield watched the Bradded R outfit fog it out of town. Then he walked back to the sheriff's office with Gumbert and Maltby. They found the bullpen seething with discomfort and profanity.

"Yuh can't do this, Maltby!" fumed Raines Skelton. "When I get out of here—"

"Who said you were goin' to get out?" interrupted the mayor.

Skelton fairly danced with rage. Hatfield's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners.

"Ready to hold court, Your Honor?" he asked the mayor, with great gravity.

Mayor Maltby sat down importantly behind the sheriff's desk. He cleared his throat, glowered at the suddenly silent prisoners.

"Raines Skelton," he said, "For bustin' up the peace, I'm sentencin' you fellers to thirty days in the calaboose!"

A wail of woe went up from the bull pen.

"With sentence suspended durin' good behavior," concluded the mayor with a grin. "Marshal, open the door."

Hatfield obediently swung the iron door. The prisoners crowded out. Raines Skelton glared at Hatfield, then suddenly leaned against the sheriff's desk and roared with laughter.

"Never was made such a fool of since the last time I bucked my mother-in-law," he declared, wiping his streaming eyes, "but darn it, I like it! Come on, boys, let's go home. It ain't safe around here."

"Just a minute," Hatfield said.

He unpinned the badge and laid it on the desk.

"I'm resigning," he told Maltby. His eyes singled out the cowboy who threatened him through the bars.

"Feller," he said softly, with easy-to-understand meaning, "I'm not wearing a marshal's badge now, and your hardware is lying right across the street."

The big puncher shuffled his feet, fumbled his hands, and dropped his gaze. Then he looked up defiantly.

"Think I aim to get locked up again for bustin' the peace?" he demanded in injured tones. A grin split his hard face.

"Feller," he said, "if it's just the same to you, I'd like it a heap better if you and me shook hands."

They did.

CHAPTER VI

Hired Hand

MAYOR MALTBY watched the Forked S outfit head west, and breathed a sigh of relief. "But it ain't finished," he declared pessimistically. "Them fellers ain't changed their minds one bit. Hatfield cooled 'em down for right now, but they feel just the same about things as they did when they rode into town. They'll get together sooner or later, see if they don't. A couple of weeks and the big fall roundup starts, and that means they'll all be skalleyhootin' around over the range and bound to meet up with each other. Anyhow, mebbe they'll keep it out of town. Hatfield, why in blazes did yuh hafta go and throw up the marshal's job? With you wearin' that

badge I wouldn't have anythin' to worry about."

"A marshal is sort of restricted to town and doesn't pack any authority outside," Hatfield explained.

"Yuh're right there," agreed the mayor. "I'm goin to have a talk with Sheriff Dwyer as soon as he gets back to town."

Slade Gumbert turned to the door. "Reckon I'll be gettin' back to my place," he announced. "Business will be boomin' today. And just wait till they hear about it over to the mines!"

He left the office. Hatfield picked up old Bart's shotgun.

"Reckon I might as well take this back to the stable," he said. "Don't figure to need it any more today."

"No, thank the Lord!" said Mayor Maltby, fervently.

Silent groups watched Hatfield's progress along the street. Behind him, talk swirled and eddied, with much wagging of heads.

After disposing of the shotgun, Hatfield repaired to the Deuces Up. A noisy crowd was drinking and talking. There was a momentary silence at his entry, but the conversation soon resumed as the drinkers emptied and refilled their glasses.

Slade Gumbert stood at the far end of the bar, alone. His pale eyes were brooding. He nodded as Hatfield walked over to him. There was nobody within easy hearing distance.

"Gumbert," Hatfield said in low tones, "how long since you left the River boats?"

The saloon keeper started. He stared at his questioner.

"How in blazes did you know I was on the Mississippi boats?" he demanded.

"Guesswork," Hatfield replied. "I've been over there, and seen quite a few of the steamboat dealers. Had trouble over there, didn't you, Gumbert?"

Slade Gumbert stiffened. His eyes took on a glassy look. His long, flexible hands dropped to his sides, the fingers spread.

"Feller," he said, a trifle thickly, "folks don't ask personal questions like that in this country." His fingers spread a little wider as he spoke.

Hatfield made no move. Only his eyes seemed to subtly change color a little.

"Not unless they expect a straight answer," he instantly countered. "Don't try it, Gumbert. You know better."

"Yes," Gumbert admitted quietly, "I know better. I'm purty good, but I wouldn't have a chance. All right, I'll come clean. I'm wanted in Louisiana, for a killin'."

His eyes met Hatfield's steadily as he made the statement.

Hatfield nodded. "I'm not particularly interested in things that happen in another state," he said, "and there are killings and killings."

"It was one of those things that happen on the boats," Gumbert said. "Five aces in a deck. I'll tell yuh about it."

HE BEGAN talking, rather volubly, and as he spoke, Jim Hatfield visioned the scene on the steamboat tied to the wharf of a small town. He saw a tall, ice-eyed man standing behind a gambling table, a blazing gun in one hand, a torn ace of spades in the other. On the table lay a second ace of spades. Across the table, a stricken man reeled and fell.

"That was the way of it," concluded Gumbert. "But they don't look at such things over there like they do here, and a River gambler wouldn't have much chance in those small town courts. So I cut and run for it. Swam the river and got away. Swore off cards that night. Haven't sat in a game since, and that was three years back. I drifted west. Had a little money and bought this place. Been doin' purty well with it, too. I play square with my customers, and I run straight games."

Hatfield nodded again. "Keep on running them straight, Gumbert," he said. "It'll pay in the end. And I've a notion you are going to keep on doing well here for a long, long time."

A smile suddenly brightened his stern face. He turned and left the room.

Slade Gumbert watched his tall form pass through the swinging doors, and on his face was the look of a man from whose shoulders a heavy burden has been lifted.

"Goin' to keep on doin' well for a long, long time," he repeated Hatfield's words. "That's as good as another man's oath. Reckon I ain't got anythin' to worry about any more."

Sheriff Dwyer got back to town well after dark. Hatfield, Gumbert and Mayor Maltby were eating together at a corner table when, dusty and disgusted, he en-

tered the Deuces Up.

"They got away," he announced as he slumped into a chair and called for a drink. "We had 'em penned in that box canyon, all right, but they set fire to the brush in there and slid over the rimrock under cover of the moke. When the fire burned out and things cooled off enough for us to go in, there wasn't a sign of 'em. They must have had almighty good horses. I wouldn't have figgered a goat could have gone up them slopes."

"Did you get a look at any of them?" Hatfield asked.

"Nope," grunted the sheriff. "Morton didn't either, though he was pushin' 'em close when they slid into the canyon. He told me they were wearin' masks. They holed up behind the rocks in there and held him and his men off."

"How about the cows they rustled?" asked Maltby.

"They didn't take them in the canyon with 'em," said the sheriff. "Reckon they're scattered all over Morton's south range. He'll hafta comb 'em out of the brakes again. He was gettin' ready for the roundup and now he's got the work to do over. He's sort of riled."

"Anybody get hurt?"

Dwyer shook his head. Morton got a hole in his hat, but that's about all. Considerable shootin' I take it, but no damage done to anybody. Morton rode to town with me. Stopped off at the general store. Be here after a while, I reckon."

The sheriff had already heard of the day's happenings in town.

"Yuh did a prime chore, Hatfield," he complimented the Lone Wolf. "A plumb prime chore. Calc'late a troop of Texas Rangers couldn't have done it better."

Slade Gumbert's thin lips twitched slightly. There was an amused look in his pale eyes.

Hatfield was alone at the table when Pres Morton came in, some time later. Morton glanced about, nodded, and came over to the table.

"Reckon I'll have somethin' to eat," he said. "Want to talk to yuh, anyhow. Heard about today. Understand yuh wouldn't hold the marshal's job."

"Not exactly in my line," Hatfield replied. "I just gave Maltby a hand."

Morton nodded. "Reckon yuh're like most cowhands," he commented, "feel more at home on a horse."

"About the size of it," Hatfield agreed.

"I was talking with Skelton about you," Morton went on. "Raines would like to sign yuh up with his outfit, but he tells me yuh don't hanker to be takin sides in the row hereabouts."

"Right," Hatfield nodded.

"Well," said Morton, "I'm not takin' sides, either, as everybody knows. I can use a few more top-hands, pertickler with the roundup comin' on."

Hatfield considered a moment, his eyes thoughtful. "Reckon I could do worse," he speculated. "Guess you hired yourself a hand."

Jim Hatfield rode to the Bar M with Morton the following morning. He deliberately rode into the jaws of Death, and he knew it!

CHAPTER VII

A Lost Trick

HATFIELD found the Bar M good range but hard to work. Lying east of Rawlins' Bradded R, it curved around it to the south to sprawl for miles between the Terlingua Mountains to the east and the Mist River Hills to the west. The great Forked S, extending far to the north and sharply shaped like an L, embraced the Bradded R in its half square.

The east and west pastures of the Bar M's south range were slashed and pitted with canyons and draws, wherein cows holed up to escape the heat. Most of the gorges were grass grown and watered. Beef grew fat and sleek and exceedingly frisky within their shadowy recesses. Combing them out was considerable of a chore.

The Bar M riders were top-hands, but, for the most part, taciturn and uncommunicative. They accepted Hatfield without comment, and quickly learned to respect his ability.

Recognizing and appreciating Hatfield's unusual talents, Morton assigned him to the difficult and rather hazardous southwest pasture. Working with him was another new hand, a fresh-faced, blue-eyed youngster recently down from the north

and named Billy Wagner.

"I'm glad Morton put me on with you," Wagner confided to Hatfield. "I like to have somebody to talk to, and about all yuh can get out of most of these jiggers is grunts. Besides, they're most of 'em Arizona or New Mexico men. They handle a rope and a horse sort of different from Texas riders. Latigos instead of trunk straps on the saddles, and center fire hulls!"

Hatfield permitted himself a smile. Wagner was typically Texan, and held no brief for methods not peculiar to the Lone Star State.

He was a likeable youngster, however, and knew range work. Hatfield liked him from the start.

"Sort of lonesome in the bunkhouse, too, for a young feller," Wagner further remarked. "Nobody there but them old daddies who worked for Morton's uncle before he died. The new men, the fellers from Arizona, sleep in the ranchhouse."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes thoughtful, and changed the subject.

Hatfield and Wagner worked in the shadow of the grim Mist River Hills. Their jagged crests of naked rock fanged darkly into the blue of the sky and their boulder strewn slopes, sparsely grown with scraggly vegetation, gleamed coldly in the sunshine and frowned ominously when the shades of evening crept up from the emerald billows of the rangeland.

THOSE bleak hills interested Hatfield. Their towering battlements had an inscrutable look to them, as if they veiled an ancient mystery. The rugged slopes appeared practically unclimbable. Not that anything other than a loco goat or a bug-hunting lizard would want to climb them.

Back among those desolate and broken crags, he knew, was the grim gorge known as Mist River Canyon.

"Nobody ever been in there and lived to tell about it, I reckon," Pres Morton had told him. "Doubt if yuh could even see into the canyon from the rimrock, if it was possible to get there. It's a good eight miles from one end to the other, and I reckon the water runs in there like a mill race. Nothin' but drownin' for anything that gets swept in there, I figger."

Hatfield was inclined to agree with Morton, and thought of the cows he had seen hurtled into the dark mouth of the gorge.

Raines Skelton was thinking of it, too, when Hatfield encountered him in town a couple of days later.

"Lost another big herd," he told the Ranger. "Trailed 'em to the bank of Mist River, just north of the canyon. I'd sure like to line sights with the sidewinder who did it. Bad enough to have your critters widelooped and run off, but to have 'em drowned like too many kittens sure makes a man paw sod."

The following morning, leaving Billy Wagner searching the nooks and crevices of a brush grown canyon, Hatfield rode south along the base of the Mist River Hills. As he progressed south, the vegetation thinned, the grass grew scant, until he was riding over a sandy desert dotted with chimney rocks and buttes and occasional patches of greasewood or sage. Grotesquely shaped cactuses put in an appearance and the heat noticeably increased.

More and more rugged grew the hills, their color changing to raw reds and yellows luridly reflecting the sun's rays. The desert became more austere as it rolled southward toward the distant Rio Grande.

Finally Hatfield sighted a thread of green that he knew must be the struggling growth bordering Mist River after it flowed from its canyon to ultimately dissipate its waters in the thirsty sands.

The southern rampart of the hills was a towering battlement of reddish stone that thrust up sheer from the desert's floor. Hatfield turned Goldy and rode beneath the frowning cliffs. Three miles of progress and he rounded a bulge and sighted the mouth of Mist River Canyon, less than a hundred yards distant. He pulled rein on the river bank and sat gazing at the water flowing from the mouth of the gorge.

HE INSTANTLY noticed several things. First, that the south mouth of the canyon was much wider than its northern entrance. He also noted that the river here was wider and shallower and more sluggish than before it entered the gorge ten miles to the north. His black brows drew together as he scrutinized the stream.

Finally he drew a note book and the

stub of a pencil from his pocket and began writing figures on a blank sheet, pausing from time to time to estimate the width of the stream and the apparent depth of the water. He closed the note book and gazed at the canyon mouth.

"Goldy," he said, "here's a funny one. Unless my calculations are way off, and I don't think they are, there's a lot less water comes out of that canyon than flows into it up north. Now what's the answer to that one? May not mean anything much, but it may mean a lot. Sure would like to get a look into that crack farther north."

He pondered the notion of sending the sorrel up stream through the shallow appearing water, but decided against it. Goldy's legs were too precious to risk on such a venture, unless the need was urgent. Hatfield raised his eyes to the sun shimmering cliff tops. He shook his head doubtfully, turned Goldy and rode back the way he had come.

Several more days followed without event, days of hard work and regular ranch routine. Hatfield began to wonder if he hadn't made a mistake and was riding an off-trail.

"Sure looks that way," he told Goldy. "Nothing 'pears to be happening down here. The only thing worth noticing is the fact that Wagner and I are kept here alone on the southwest range, and that doesn't mean much. New hands on a spread usually get the more unpleasant assignments. That's only natural and holds good for any business."

And then things proceeded to happen. Mid morning found Hatfield working a narrow canyon thickly grown with tall brush. The canyon was a box with perpendicular sides and end wall. Down its center ran a considerable stream of water.

Hatfield was forking a rangy bay, an excellent rope horse, equipped with a worn but serviceable stock saddle, of which Morton had several hanging in his barn. Hatfield seldom used Goldy for ranch work on rough ground, not caring to expose the sorrel to the danger of injury.

That watered, grass and brush grown canyon was ideal for a hole-up for cattle, but to his surprise, Hatfield combed the gorge to its head without flushing a single cow.

"Looks almost like somebody had worked over this crack plumb recent," he mused as he turned the bay down-canyon.

In deference to long habit, while doing his work in a quiet, efficient manner, Hatfield continually took stock of his surroundings. Every thicket or clump of chimney rock came in for a careful scrutiny as he rode. He noted the movements of birds on the wing or of little animals in the brush. No broken twig or displaced boulder escaped his attention.

HE WAS nearing the canyon mouth when abruptly his gaze fixed on a thicket a couple of hundred yards ahead. Over the thicket a bluejay was tumbling and darting with angry cries.

"That feller's actin' up funny," he muttered. "Something's sure got him on the prod. Snake on a limb maybe, or a wildcat in the brush."

Nevertheless, he gave the thicket careful attention as he approached it. The sun was almost overhead, its vertical rays striking downward through the growth.

Suddenly Hatfield slewed sideways in his saddle. He left the hull in a streaking dive. The bay, startled by the unexpected move, reared high.

There was the thud of a bullet striking flesh, the crack of a rifle. From the thicket swirled a streamer of blue smoke.

The bay screamed once, crashed over on its side, twitched a moment and was still.

Hatfield was behind the carcass before the bay's limbs ceased jerking. He slid his rifle from the boot, which, fortunately, was on the upper side of the dead horse. Another bullet thudded into the body. A third screamed over it.

Hatfield thrust his rifle barrel across the body and raked the thicket with a stream of lead. A fourth shot answered the volley.

"Want to play tag, eh?" he yelled at the hidden drygulcher. "Well, we're liable to have some fun before you smoke me out."

A moment later, however, he realized that that was just what the drygulcher had in mind—to smoke him out, literally. A blue streamer swirled up from the thicket, rapidly thickened. A sprightly crackling sounded from the depths of the growth.

"Set fire to the brush!" Hatfield exclaimed, staring at the thickening column. "Back behind it waiting for me. If I try to

get through on either side, he'll drop me like a settin' quail!"

The brush was very dry and the fire spread with astonishing rapidity. In a matter of minutes, a sheet of fire extended from wall to wall of the narrow canyon, and, driven by a favorable wind, was racing up the gorge.

Having no more fear of bullets for the moment, Hatfield scrambled to his feet and headed up-canyon at a swinging trot.

Soon, however, he was forced to quicken his pace. The fire was rolling after him like a galloping horse.

"Outsmarted!" he growled disgustedly as he lengthened his stride. "They got plenty wrinkles on their horns," he thought. "Let things ride along quiet and peaceful for a week without making a move. Been keeping tabs on me all the time. Figured out that I was keeping Wagner within easy distance at first, and waited till I got careless and let him drift off on his own. Soon as he was well out of the way and no chance of him spotting what they figured to do, they twirl their loop.

"Well, I'm liable to pay heavy for the mistake. Unless I get a break, or figure something out, it's mighty apt to be curtains. The brush grows thick right to the head of the canyon, and nothing but a lizard could go up those walls. If I can't find a crack or cave to slide into, I'm going to be the prime attraction of a barbecue!"

As he loped up the gorge, he eyed the sidewalls in hope of discovering some crevice into which he might slip; but the dark cliffs towered unbroken. The smoke was getting thick, the heat between the encroaching walls increasing. The canyon sucked the fire into its depths with a mighty draft, the end wall being somewhat lower than the sides.

HATFIELD was breathing heavily long before he reached the head of the gorge. The fire was close at his heels and whirling brands and soaring sparks momentarily threatened to start a blaze ahead that would cut him off between two sheets of flame. He sighted the end wall, where the stream began in a great spring that bubbled up from the ground. Had it run from under the canyon wall, he might have sought sanctuary there.

Grimly he counted his chances. The summary was not encouraging. The fire was but a few hundred yards behind him. Its crackling and roaring filled the gorge with a pandemonium of ominous sound. Sparks stung his flesh and smoldered on his clothes. Burning brands darted at him like lightning flashes. The smoke clouds swirled around him in a suffocating mist. The air rushing up the gorge was like the blast from the mouth of a furnace.

He reached the head of the canyon. Before him towered the pitiless, unclimbable end wall. Behind was the advancing wall of flame. He glanced around, shook his head. There appeared no possible avenue of escape.

"One chance," he muttered, "and that one not over good. Have to try it, though. Nothing else to do."

He ejected the shell from his rifle barrel and left the breech open. Then he slid into the still, fairly deep waters just below the bubbling spring. Holding his head above surface, he rooted a couple of small boulders from their beds. He eased back in the water and rolled these upon his chest. As an afterthought, he whipped his neckerchief loose and bound it tightly over his nostrils.

Then he placed the muzzle of the rifle in his mouth, clamping his lips closely about it, and eased his head under water until it rested on the muddy bottom a good eighteen inches below the surface. The lock of the rifle, with the breech open, extended above water level. He could breathe, after a fashion, the air that filtered down through the barrel.

"Now if I don't get boiled, I may be able to hold out," he told himself. "The brush is thinnest up here next to the end wall, and once the fire gets here, it should burn itself out in a hurry. Just a matter of hanging on, but that's liable to be considerable of a chore."

It was. Breathing through the barrel was no easy task. To make matters worse, the smoke laden air invoked an urge to cough, and coughing with an iron tube in the mouth and a strip of cloth bound tightly across the nose is a somewhat complicated matter, and, under the circumstances, pretty sure to guarantee death by strangulation.

The air became almost too hot to breathe. Hatfield could feel the water of

the stream actually becoming warm. Belatedly he realized that he had neglected to remove the cartridges from the magazine of the rifle. If the iron, above water, got hot enough, they would explode, and then it would be curtains for sure.

The fire was all around him now. The veil of water over his eyes, when he cautiously opened them to stare upward, was a marvel of exquisite coloring, scarlet and amber and violet and rose, as the flames flickered over the surface and the smoke clouds rolled. Awful as was his position, Hatfield could not but appreciate its beauty.

BUT very quickly he had things to think about other than the beauty of flame kaleidescoped by moving water. More smoke than air was coming down the rifle barrel. His lungs were laboring, and the water pressure on his body did not help. He began to experience a queer distortion of time and distance. It seemed as if he had lain on the muddy bottom for an eternity.

The flame curtain of the water receded to a tremendous distance, then rushed close again, only to recede once more. In his ears was a tolling as of all the church bells in the world, and behind the metallic clanging was a roar like the rending apart of the world. Hatfield knew he was on the verge of unconsciousness, and to lose his senses would inevitably mean death.

With a mighty effort of the will he got a grip on himself. He fought madly against the encroaching world of fantasy that threatened to engulf him. He forced himself to think of ordinary, everyday things —his horse, his beginnings as a Texas Ranger, his college days before. Anything to give the real ascendancy over the unreal.

And then, with a surge of hope, he saw that the flame curtain clothing the water had dimmed to a uniform gray. That could mean but one thing. The fire had burned itself out for want of fresh fuel. Now only the smolders and the thinning smoke clouds held sway beyond his watery sanctuary.

Cautiously he raised his head until it was above water, blinking as the stinging smoke seared his eyes. The canyon was still blanketed with a fogging mist.

But the air was breatheable and the updraught was swiftly thinning the smoke pall. Already the sun was breathing through. Another moment and its rays were pouring down hotly from a cloudless sky.

Hatfield crawled out of the water. He felt stiff and sore all over. There was a ringing in his ears and a queer shaky feeling to his limbs. Undoubtedly he had been very near his end.

WITH trembling fingers, he drew his guns and made sure that they were in perfect working order. He did not worry about the effect the wetting would have on his well greased ammunition; and the strong and simple mechanism of the heavy Colts would not suffer. He drew forth his sodden tobacco and papers and spread both on a hot rock to dry, which they quickly did. He emptied boots and wrung most of the water from his clothes.

Then, feeling chilly, a strange contrast to his recent sensations, he managed to roll a cigarette, and stretched out in the sun to warm and dry himself. A few drags of fragrant tobacco smoke and his nerves quieted. He gazed at the sky with puckered eyes and thought over the situation.

"Well, they took this trick, all right," he told himself. "And came mighty nigh to taking the game. But they tipped their hand at last. Now I know definitely they are on to me and out to do me in. They won't catch me asleep again."

He rested for nearly an hour, then got to his feet, rather stiffly, and headed down the canyon. Flickers and smoldering embers still dotted the floor of the gorge, but the wind dissipated the smoke. And the light, quick-burning brush had not overly heated the rocks.

Before he had gone far, Hatfield heard a shot, down-canyon, then another and another, evenly spaced.

"Billy Wagner coming looking for me," he deduced. He drew his gun and fired an answering shot to allay the young cowboy's fears. A little later he saw Wagner fogging his way up the gorge through the powdery ash.

"Blazes, feller!" shouted Wagner. "I was scairt you were a goner. I remembered yuh sayin' you was goin' to work this hole today, and when I saw the smoke boilin' up and realized it came from the

canyon, I sure got a bad feelin'. What set it?"

"A match, I reckon," Hatfield replied dryly.

Wagner shook his head. "Could be," he admitted, "but how a jigger as careful as you are with matches and tobacco could start a brush fire is past me. I've a notion some careless jigger was traipsin' around down here. Did yuh see anybody?"

"Nope," Hatfield replied, with truth.

"Got your horse, eh?" continued Wagner.

"He died from a bullet," Hatfield answered.

Wagner clucked sympathetically. "Reckon there was nothin' else for yuh to do," he said, drawing the conclusion Hatfield wished him to, for the moment, anyhow.

"What I'd like to know is how in blazes you managed to keep from getting cooked?" asked Wagner.

Hatfield told him. The young cowboy shook his head in admiration.

"Plumb smart," he applauded. "Me, I'd never have thought of that. I won't forget it. Might come in handy some time. Uh-huh, plumb smart. Well, climb up behind me. I think this critter will pack double."

Wagner's dun groaned a little under Hatfield's two hundred pounds, but offered no serious objection to the added burden. Both he and his riders were glad when they cleared the smoky, dusty canyon and were out on the range once more.

Hatfield let Wagner do most of the talking when they reached the ranchhouse, merely corroborating the cowboy's story of how he, Hatfield, had been trapped in the canyon by fire.

"Brush fires in this section at this time of the year are bad," said Pres Morton, shaking his head. "You were mighty lucky, Hatfield. Lucky, too, there weren't a bunch of cows holed up in there."

"Yes," the Lone Wolf agreed, "it was—lucky."

CHAPTER VIII

Trumping a Trick

MORTON insisted that Hatfield take a day off to rest up after his harrowing experience. So, late the following afternoon, Hatfield rode to town. He entered the Deuces Up and found Slade Gumbert at the end of the bar as usual.

Gumbert was regarding, with little favor, a group of five men drinking together farther up the mahogany.

"Where in blazes do they all come from?" he demanded querulously of Hatfield. "This town 'pears to be the stoppin' off place for all the owlhoots and slick-iron artists in Texas. If that bunch is up to any good, I sure miss my guess. Look at the way their guns are slung. And yuh can't hear a thing they say, two steps off."

"Tied down holsters," Hatfield mused. "Well, I never knew a gent who tied down the ends to live over-long. A plain advertisement that he's either looking for or expecting trouble."

"That bunch is lookin' for anythin' that ain't nailed down," grumbled Gumbert. "I'm sure keepin' an eye on my strongbox tonight."

The men in question did have the look of tough hombres. They wore the garb of the rangeland, which showed signs of much hard riding, but so far as Hatfield was able to see, their hands bore no marks of rope or branding iron, although doubtless all had been cowpokes at one time or another.

But despite Gumbert's pessimism, the quintet created no disturbance. They drank quietly for some time, conversing together in low tones, sat down at a table and consumed a hearty meal, had another drink or two and then left in a body.

Hatfield also left the saloon a few minutes later, slipping out unobtrusively and walking along the street in a leisurely fashion till he reached the rack where Goldy was tied. When he hitched the sorrel there, earlier in the evening, he had noted the five horses bearing meaningless Mexican brands that were already tethered to the pins.

Before he reached the hitch-rack, the four horses in question passed him, heading east. Forking them were the men who had attracted Gumbert's unfavorable attention. They glanced neither to right or left and apparently took no notice of the Lone Wolf.

Hatfield did not quicken his pace, but when he reached the rack, he untied and mounted Goldy with speed. He sent the

sorrel east along Main Street at a slow walk.

It was a blue and silver night, with a sky spangled with stars and a thin slice of moon in the west. As he cleared the outskirts of the town, he saw the five horsemen some distance ahead of him. Pulling Goldy up, he waited until they were but shadowy blurs on the trail. Then he sent the sorrel forward again.

Jim Hatfield relied on his own unusually keen eyesight to make the chore of trailing the five plausible. He felt that he should be able to keep the group in sight and at the same time remain unnoticeable himself, riding as he did at the edge of the trail and taking advantage of shadows cast by the frequent clumps of growth.

"May be just a useless ride, but somehow or other, I've got a hunch about those jiggers," he told Goldy. "They left town like gents definitely headed for somewhere, and with things to do."

THE riders continued steadily east for several miles. Then they turned off at a fork that veered more to the south. The track, Hatfield knew, was the road to the Terlingua Mines to the southeast of town and beyond the Bradded R's east pasture.

Suddenly Hatfield's interest quickened. Just beyond the forks, a man had ridden from the shadow and joined the group.

For nearly two hours the group rode steadily east by south. Far behind, a moving shadow amid the shadows, drifted Goldy and the Lone Wolf. Finally, in the last light of the dying moon, Hatfield saw a dark cluster of buildings ahead, close to the rearing bulk of the Terlinguas. One much larger structure stood out against the mountainside.

The group turned from the main trail and rode toward the settlement which Hatfield knew must be the mining town of Terlingua. He spoke to Goldy and the sorrel increased his pace. The horsemen ahead had disappeared from sight in the shadow of the tall, dark building at the base of the mountain.

Terlingua was a shack town that housed the large number of workers who found employment in the nearby mines. Once each month, on payday, the miners descended in a body on Crater for a payday bust, and on those days, Crater was lively indeed.

Tomorrow would be payday and everybody had gone to bed early to rest up in anticipation of the celebration.

The town was dominated by the huge, gaunt structure, set on a little plateau above the rude dwellings, that housed the stamp mill. Tonight the windows were dark save for one golden square that marked the office.

In the office, the paymaster and two clerks were busy making out the payroll and filling the envelopes that would be passed out to the miners early next morning. As a routine matter of precaution, a guard sat in the office with a shotgun across his knees, a rifle ready to hand. The Terlingua Mines had never had any trouble and didn't expect any, but what was considered adequate provision was taken against the possibility.

The office was warm and comfortable. The monotonous hum of voices calling and checking figures was soothing. The guard, the heels of his boots hooked over a rung of his back-tilted chair, drowsed half way between waking and sleeping.

He was wide awake enough, however, when the outer door suddenly banged open. Wide awake, but not soon enough. Before he could more than clutch at his shotgun, he found himself looking into the black muzzle of a long-barreled Forty-five. Behind the six-gun was a masked face with only glinting eyes showing. And behind the masked gun holder were five more masked men, their guns trained on the paymaster and the clerks.

The guard opened and closed his mouth like a stranded fish, no words coming forth.

The man with the gun was doing all the talking.

"On your feet," he ordered, his voice harsh and muffled behind the black folds of his mask. "Let that scattergun fall to the floor. Okay, now turn around and face the wall, with your hands up and against it. Stay there, and nothing will happen to yuh. Move, and yuh get it. All right, boys, herd them pencil pushers over alongside him and get busy."

"Is—is this a robbery?" gasped the paymaster.

"Naw," replied the gunman, "it's just a game of checkers, and it's your move!"

The paymaster moved as the forward jutting Colt emphasized the command.

A split second later he was facing the wall, his trembling hands pressed against it. His clerks were ranged alongside him.

One of the robbers strode to the table and began stuffing the envelopes and loose money into a sack. The leader, a broad-shouldered man of little above medium height, searched the room with a swift glance that centered on the big iron safe over to one side. The door was closed, apparently locked.

"Open that box over there," he ordered the paymaster, giving him a dig in the ribs with his gun muzzle.

The paymaster tried to climb the wall, but couldn't. "I—I can't," he squawked. "I—I don't know the combination. Nobody but the treasurer knows it, and he isn't here."

"Sure yuh're not lyin'?" growled the owlhoot. "Mebbe a little fire on your back will make yuh remember yuh are."

"Honest, I don't know it," quavered the paymaster, his limbs shaking.

The bandit regarded him a moment through his mask holes, nodded his head.

"Guess yuh don't," he agreed. "If yuh did, yuh wouldn't be that scairt. Don't matter, anyhow. Here, Brade, keep your gun on these jiggers."

One of the robbers left the table and stood guard behind the prisoners. The masked leader strode to the safe and squatted beside it, his ear pressed against the steel door, his slim, steely looking fingers deftly twirling the combination knob.

For a minute or more he twirled the knob forward and back with the utmost nicety. Suddenly there was a soft clicking sound. The bandit grunted with satisfaction and swung the door open. A moment later he began tossing thick packets of bills to the man with the sack.

"Foldin' money," he remarked. "Figgered there had ought to be some around. They pay pills with it in town. The metal is for the rock busters who like to hear their dinero jingle."

Swiftly the safe was emptied. The man with the sack jerked the pucker string tight. The leader arose from the safe and strode across the room with a last quick, all-embracing glance.

At his nod, one of his followers picked up rifle and shotgun. Another relieved the guard of his belt gun.

"All right," said the leader, "let's go."

He whirled as a voice rang through the room—

"Not just yet! Elevate!"

In the doorway towered the Lone Wolf, a gun in each hand.

CHAPTER IX

The Lone Wolf

THE broad-shouldered leader was behind his men. With the speed of light he went sideways and down. His gun boomed even as Hatfield went along the wall, firing with both hands. Lances of flame spurted through the darkness, bullets thudded against the wall. The place was a pandemonium of yells, screams, curses, the boom of guns and the crash of smashing furniture. With a clang-jangle of breaking glass and splintering woodwork, the window went to pieces. Boots thudded on the ground outside. Hatfield fired at the sound, whirled and bounded for the open door. His knees hit the squalling paymaster, who was scuttling around on all fours. He sailed through the air and hit the floor with a crash that shook the building.

Half stunned by the force of the fall, it took Hatfield some little time to flounder to his feet and get his bearings. He rushed outside, stuffing fresh cartridges into his empty guns.

Lights were flashing up in the shacks. The shouts of the aroused miners added to the tumult, through which Hatfield's keen ears caught the sound of horses' irons beating swiftly into the distance.

The moon had set and the night was not very dark. Pursuit was out of the question.

Half-clad men were running toward the office, volleying questions.

"Inside," Hatfield shouted to one bearing a lighted lantern.

The office was a shambles of broken glass and smashed and overturned furniture. Three bodies lay on the floor. A dead hand still grasped the stuffed money sack.

"Three of 'em got away, including that bird who started the rukus, or I'm a heap mistook," Hatfield growled. Holding the lantern high, he glanced around the room.

The guard's scalp had been nicked by a bullet and he looked rather sick, but, Hatfield decided, had suffered no serious damage. One clerk had a hole through the fleshy part of his upper arm. The gibbering paymaster and the other clerk were untouched.

As more lanterns arrived, Hatfield strode over to the wounded clerk, little more than a boy, who was sitting in a chair beside the overturned desk, gripping his bullet punctured arm to lessen the bleeding and swearing softly behind his clenched teeth.

"Good man! You can take it!" Hatfield remarked approvingly as he cut away the sleeve to bare the injured member.

"I'm not a fightin' man, but if I ever line a gun with those blankety-blank-blanks!" the clerk swore wrathfully.

"Hope you get the chance," Hatfield said, "and I've a notion if you do, you won't miss."

HATFIELD quickly fashioned a tourniquet and controlled the bleeding. Then he hurried out to his horse, returning a few moments later with a roll of bandage and a small pot of antiseptic ointment which he always carried in his saddle pouch. He deftly bandaged the wound and fashioned a sling to support it.

"That'll hold you till we get you to Crater," he told the clerk. "Doc Cooper can take care of it right, then."

"I've a notion he won't do any better a job than you did," grunted the clerk, taking a long drag at the cigarette Hatfield rolled and lighted it for him. "And he won't be able to do much for those gents on the floor you 'took care of'," he added significantly.

The demoralized paymaster had recovered enough to ask questions.

"Saw them turning off toward the mill and figured they were up to no good," Hatfield replied briefly. "Thought I'd better have a look-see."

The paymaster turned to the miners crowding the office.

"Boys," he said, "here's the man who saved your payday for you. And saved the company a good many thousands more, as well," he added, with a nod toward the open safe.

The building shook to spontaneous cheering. The grinning hard-rock men patted Hatfield on the back, crowded around to shake his hand.

"Shure and the b'ys would have been mortal disap'inted to have their cilibration put off," declared a giant red-headed foreman almost as tall as Hatfield and even broader. "We hope to be seein' ye in Crater tomorrow, sor. Shure and ye won't be lackin' for a wee drap of the crature whin we meet."

Hatfield nooded his appreciation of the invitation, but made a mental resolve to steer clear of the big foreman and his "crature" soon to be released from the prisoning bottle.

He turned his attention to the guard's creased scalp.

The wounded men cared for, Hatfield squatted beside the dead owlhoots and removed their masks. He instantly recognized them as three of the five men he had seen drinking in the Deuces Up.

"But the jigger who started things, the big he-wolf of the pack got away, all right," he muttered. "I'm willing to bet a hatful of pesos he was the feller who joined up with the other five below the trail forks."

He raised his glance to the open safe. "Did they make you open it, or was it open already?" he asked the paymaster.

"Neither," the other replied. "One of them, the one who seemed to be giving the orders, worked the combination and opened it."

Hatfield stared at the man. "Sort of unusual for this section," he remarked.

"He did it in less than a minute," said the paymaster. "I don't know the combination, but I do happen to know it is an intricate one. It didn't seem to bother him, though. If he had known it, he couldn't have worked it more quickly or easier."

HATFIELD gazed at the safe, his eyes thoughtful. "How about the payroll money?" he asked suddenly. "You wouldn't have left that lying here in the office."

"There is a small safe in the main mill office," replied the paymaster. "It would have been put in there after we finished making up the payroll. This safe here contains the private papers and documents of the mine owners as well as usually a considerable amount of cash."

"Who knows the combination?" Hatfield asked.

"The company treasurer is the only person here regularly who knows it," the paymaster replied. "Of course the president knows it, and perhaps some other high officials. I can't say as to that. Perhaps, too, some of the larger stockholders may know it. I'm not sure about that, either."

"Know who those stockholders are?" Hatfield asked.

The man repeated several names, all unfamiliar to Hatfield.

"Raines Skelton holds considerable," he added, "and Slade Gumbert, who owns a saloon in Crater, has a big block. Gumbert sort of got in on the ground floor when the company was first formed and production wasn't much to brag about. Reckon he's about as big a single stockholder as we've got. But the treasurer is the only one around here now I can say for sure knows the combination."

Hatfield nodded, the concentration furrow deepening between his brows.

"Where's the treasurer?" he asked suddenly.

"Went to Crater this afternoon. Not expected back until tomorrow."

Suddenly the man's eyes dilated. "You don't think—" he began thickly.

"No, I hardly think they got hold of him and forced him to divulge the combination," Hatfield replied, "although it's possible. My guess is that either somebody acquainted with the combination let it slip, by accident or design, or that jigger is an experienced safe cracker, something not often met with in west Texas. The boys out here use dynamite or sledge hammers."

"That's right," agreed the paymaster. "I never heard of anything like this before."

"You always make up the payroll at night, the night before payday?" Hatfield asked.

"We always have," the paymaster replied. "After the mill shuts down, as it always does for payday, and things are quiet."

"But they don't do it again, if I have anything to say about it," he declared emphatically. "And if they do, you can wager I won't be here to handle it. I lost five years off my life tonight."

"A inch more to the right with that blankety-blank slug and I'd have lost all I got comin' to me off mine," growled the guard. "That's the first time I was ever caught settin', and, gents, it's the last!"

Hatfield grinned. He felt that the guard meant it. "Let's see what these boys have in their pockets," he suggested. "Might find something that ties them up with somebody."

However, the miscellany of odds and ends the pockets turned out proved of no significance. Hatfield was about to give up the search when his probing hand encountered a folded slip of paper. He deftly palmed it and slipped it into his own pocket without the others noting the transaction.

The search completed, Hatfield stood up, and addressed the paymaster.

"Have this wounded boy taken to Crater in a buckboard or wagon," he directed. "And notify Sheriff Dwyer of what happened. I'm heading back to the Bar M. Got work to do tomorrow."

The paymaster accepted without questions the order of the tall cowhand who appeared to have usurped all the authority in sight. And he thanked Hatfield profusely for his timely assistance.

WHEN he was some distance from the mining town, Hatfield drew the folded paper from his pocket, struck a match and examined it by the flickering light. His brows drew together over the seemingly meaningless jumble of figures scrawled on the torn sheet:

6076, 6077, 6081, 6084, 6074—Crater—Thursday.

6051

"What in blazes?" he wondered as the match flickered out. "Crater, that's plain enough. Thursday, that is today—yesterday, rather, it's past twelve midnight—but what about those numerals? The bottom one has all the appearance of being intended for a signature. Since when have owlhoots started going by numbers? This is a puzzler."

Hatfield slipped into the Bar M bunkhouse so quietly as not to awaken the slumbering punchers. With scarcely two hours of sleep, morning found him showing no results of his hectic night. He rode south with Billy Wagner and went to work on the west range again, combing out

steers, sawing a few horns and branding a few calves.

The day passed without event. Hatfield was still puzzling over the cryptic figures written on the sheet of paper, and still unable to make head or tail of them.

When he and Billy Wagner got back to the ranchhouse, shortly before dark, they found a visitor waiting. It was Sheriff John Dwyer.

The sheriff greeted Hatfield warmly. "Son," he said, "yuh sure have raised hell and shoved a big chunk under a corner since you lit in this section. That was a prime chore yuh did down to the Terlingua, almost as good as the one yuh did durin' the twenty minutes you were town marshal of Crater. We hauled them three sidewinders back to town today. They ain't showed no signs of gettin' up and walkin' away.

"Doc aims to hold an inquest on 'em tomorrow, just to keep in practice, I reckon, and he wants yuh there. I spoke to Morton and he said okay. He ain't feelin' over good himself, Pres ain't. His horse fell with him last night when he was ridin' back from town. Pitched him in a brush patch and skinned his face up some and wrenched his leg. He's limpin' bad. Said he figgered to put in a day or so in bed."

"Sorry to hear about it," Hatfield replied. "Okay, I'll be with yuh tomorrow."

"Why not ride back to town with me tonight?" suggested the sheriff. "We'll be company for each other and I got a spare bed in my place."

Hatfield agreed, and after eating, he and the sheriff set out together.

"Them three devils yuh downed were hard lookin' hombres," said the sheriff as they jogged along. "Everybody took a look at 'em, and Slade Gumbert spotted 'em right off as three of a bunch of five that was in his place early yesterday evenin'. Slade said he sure didn't like their looks and recalled mentionin' it to you."

Hatfield nodded. "That's right," he agreed.

SHERIFF DWYER turned in his saddle and bent a searching glance on the Lone Wolf. "Hatfield," he said, "did yuh happen to be ridin' down toward Terlingua last night plumb by accident?"

Hatfield shook his head. "No," he admitted. "I didn't like the looks of those hellions, either, so when they rode out of town, I tailed them."

"So I figgered," the sheriff said. "Trailed 'em to the stamp mill, and tackled all six of 'em! Gentlemen, hush! By the way, where did the sixth one come from? There was only five in the Deuces Up?"

"That's something I'd mighty well like to know," Hatfield returned. "He joined up with 'em just below where the trail forks."

The sheriff shook his head and swore, then he faced Hatfield again, gazing long and earnestly at his stern profile etched in pale flame by the silver moonbeams.

"Hatfield," he said, "just who are yuh, anyhow?"

"Told you my name, and it's a real one," Htafield replied, with the ghost of a smile.

"Uh-huh, Jim Hatfield of—"

The sheriff waited expectantly. Hatfield continued to smile.

"Of the Texas Rangers," he completed the sentence.

"I knowed it," the sheriff declared. "Couldn't be anythin' else." He uttered an explosive exclamation.

"And I got yuh spotted, sure as shootin'!" he said. "Yuh're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield admitted.

"I should have knowed that, too, first off," said the sheriff. "Nobody else could do the things you've done since yuh landed here. Nobody else since the days of Wyatt Earp could have done what yuh did in Crater when yuh stood off the Forked S and the Bradded R.

"Wyatt used to do things like that, when he was marshal of Dodge and Ellsworth and Wichita, but nobody else ever did till you came along. Raines Skelton told me that when yuh lined him with that six-gauge, he felt wings sproutin' on his shoulders!"

"It was largely bluff on my part," Hatfield smiled. "I wouldn't have had much chance if they had cut loose on me."

"Uh-huh," the sheriff replied dryly. "Uh-huh, bluff, but a bluff none of them thirty salty cowhands cared to call. Any more than Bert Rawlins and his bunch cared to call the one yuh run on 'em in the Last Chance. You can call it bluff, but I reckon them fellers saw it as four aces pat."

Hatfield laughed and changed the subject.

"Hear anything more from Skelton or Rawlins?" he asked.

"I sure have," the sheriff replied disgustedly. "Rawlins came stormin' in yesterday mornin' to tell me he'd lost more cows drowned in Mist River Canyon. Swore his losses were cripplin' him and if they kept up much longer he'd lose his spread.

" 'Lowed that was just what Skelton and the others wanted to happen, and I couldn't talk him into seein' it any other way. He left swearin' he'd shoot any Forked S hellion he caught on his range, on sight, and yuh know the Forked S hands often take a short cut across the Bradded R to get to their southwest range."

I'm afraid we're in for trouble," he said.

HATFIELD looked grave. "With the big roundup starting next week, "Those two outfits are bound to meet up then. It's going to be a chore to keep something bad from happening."

"I've thought of that," the sheriff admitted, "and right this minute I'm figgerin' a little plan that may help a lot. Yuh'll find out about it when the time comes."

"I'm not quite ready to let out that I'm a Ranger," Hatfield said. "I'm not plumb sure the men responsible for all this trouble know I am one. They may, but I have half a notion they think I'm just another owlhoot aimin' to horn in on their game. I'd like to keep under cover a little while longer, if I can."

"What I'm figgerin' on is liable to help yuh to that," said the sheriff.

When they reached Crater, Dwyer suggested they drop in and see the coroner before going to bed. Hatfield, still pondering the cryptic notations on the slip of paper in his pocket, absently agreed.

"Doc Cooper was up and pottering around when they entered his little office. The first thing that caught Hatfield's eye was the two sections of hair rope with which the bodies of the slain cowboys, Clem Buster and Bob Hawley, had been hanged. Doc had them fastened on pegs back of his desk.

Hatfield gazed at the grisly things and as he did so, his mind returned to the visit he had paid the state prison warden several years before, when he had seen ropes of a similar pattern displayed in a case in the office devoted to the souvenirs manufactured by the prisoners.

Suddenly his eyes glowed. He uttered an exclamation under his breath.

"Sheriff," he said aloud, "Doc knows I'm a Ranger—has known me for years, so we can talk freely in here. There's something I want you to do for me. I want you to send a telegram to the warden of the state prison. I'll tell you what to say. Get a pencil or pen and write it down. I want the answer to come to you. Hold it for me."

A little later, Sheriff Dwyer stared in bewilderment at the message Hatfield dictated. He read:

Do the numbers: 6076, 6077, 6081, 6074, 6051, mean anything to you? Especially, relative to the inmate who braided souvenir hair ropes of a peculiar pattern and was released from prison about two years ago.

"What in blazes does it mean?" asked the sheriff.

"I took this slip of paper from the body of one of those owlhoots, in the stamp mill at Terlingua," Hatfield explained, handing the slip to the sheriff. "It sure had me puzzled for a while, then all of a sudden, when I looked at that rope back of Doc's desk, a rope I am certain was braided in the state prison, it came to me that perhaps those numbers were the serial numbers of former prison inmates."

"Yes?" said the sheriff.

HATFIELD replied, "Yes, and I believe they are a sort of code, used by the head of the outfit responsible for what's been going on here, for the purpose of calling the bunch together when he aims to pull something like the robbery attempt at Terlingua. If the hunch is a straight one, it may give us a line on the man. It is often possible to trace the movements of a former prison inmate and thus identify him even if he is operating in another section and under another name."

"Uh-huh, I see," replied the sheriff. "Feller are you smart!"

"Mebbe," Hatfield smiled. "We'll see about that later, after we get the warden's reply."

"The nearest telegraph office is at Foster, twenty-five miles to the north of

here," said the sheriff. "I'll start for Foster as soon as it gets light in the morning, and I'll wait there for the answer."

"And," said Hatfield, "if the hunch turns out to be a straight one, send a wire, in my name, to Captain McDowell at Ranger Post headquarters, asking him to try and trace the movements of those men since they were released from prison. Perhaps you can arrange to have McDowell's answer relayed to you here."

"I'll take a deputy with me, and hole him up in Foster till the answer comes," said the sheriff. "This thing is beginnin' to look promisin'."

"Maybe," Hatfield conceded, "if we can just get past the roundup without war bustin' loose."

The coroner's inquest the following morning held Hatfield justified in killing the three robbers and commended him for the act, adding a typical cow-country rider to the verdict to the effect that it was a blankety-blank shame he didn't manage to down the other three varmints while he was at it.

Shortly after dark, Sheriff Dwyer got back to Crater with the state prison warden's answer to Hatfield's query. Taking the telegraph form, Hatfield read:

6076, JOSEPH BOWERS; 6077, WILLIAM BOWERS; 6081, PHILIP HORN; 6084, JOHN GREY; 6074, CHARLES HATCH; 6051, PETER MORROW. THESE MEN, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF MORROW, SERVED SENTENCES FOR CATTLE STEALING. MORROW WAS SENT TO PRISON FOR BANK BURGLARY. OPENED THE SAFE OF A BANK IN LAREDO AND ESCAPED WITH A LARGE SUM, BUT WAS LATER CAPTURED BY THE RANGERS. THESE MEN WERE RELEASED DURING A THREE MONTH PERIOD ABOUT TWO YEARS BACK. PRESENT WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN TO PRISON AUTHORITIES.

"I fired the message to Captain McDowell, pronto," said the sheriff. "Tom McCarty is waitin' in Foster for Captain Bill's answer. He'll bring it to me the minute he grabs it."

Hatfield nodded with satisfaction. "Now we may get somewhere," he said.

"Sure hope so," said the sheriff. "Let's go over to the Deuces Up and eat. Come along, Doc, yuh're always hungry."

Slade Gumbert was in the back room when they arrived at the Deuces Up. He opened the door in answer to the sheriff's knock.

"Come in," he said, holding the door wide. "Just finishing up checking the day's receipts. Wait till I put the pesos away and I'll eat with yuh."

He crossed to a small iron safe in the corner and squatted before it. Hatfield watched his slender, supple fingers manipulate the combination knob with the utmost nicety. The tumblers clicked, the safe door swung open. Gumbert placed the money inside and closed the door. He gave the combination knob a few deft twirls and straightened up.

"All right," he said, "let's eat."

Gumbert ordered drinks and a prime surroundin'. "Everything on the house tonight," he declared. "Reckon I can afford it. Hatfield saved me considerable dinero down at Terlingua the other night. There was a lot of money in that payroll and in the safe. The stockholders would have had to stand the loss, of course. Put it away, gents, plenty more in the kitchen when this runs out."

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER X

Roundup Days

JIM HATFIELD experienced an unpleasant premonition that the mysterious developments of the Mist River country were fast building up to a climax. Pres Morton had kept to his room for two days. When he finally did appear, he limped badly and his face was seared by the raw scabs of three deep cuts.

Young Billy Wagner met the owner as Morton left the ranchhouse on a tour of inspection, and expressed his sympathy.

"Yuh sure must have had a bad spill, Boss," he said. "Yuh look like yuh'd ate your way through a glass window."

Morton's reaction to this well meant remark astonished and disconcerted the young cowboy. His scarred face flushed darkly red, his thin lips tightened until they were like a razor cut. His eyes glittered.

"Yuh'd do better to keep your fool notions to yourself," he spat, and walked off with a stiff back.

"What in blazes was the matter with him?" Wagner wondered as he later recited his experience to Jim Hatfield. "Darned if I didn't think for a minute he was goin' to pull on me. He actually took hold of his gun handle. He was as riled as a steer with a burr under its tail. Why should he go on the prod like that? I didn't do no more'n ask him how he was feelin'."

The answer to that one interested Hatfield, decidedly, although he did not hazard an explanation for Wagner's benefit. Instead, he deftly changed the subject, preferring not to have Wagner do too much speculating over Morton's peculiar behavior, aloud.

Hatfield was mulling over this and other recent events as he rode through the gold and scarlet glory of the Autumnal rangeland. All about him was the beautiful peace of the dying year. The emerald of the prairie was tipped with amethyst that overlay the green like a veil of changing shadow. The deeper hollows were bronzed by the fading ferns, while the hill tops blazed crimson and cardinal and smoldering saffron.

The thin, fine line of the horizon had lost its sharpness and was mystically blurred by a cerulean haze. There was a hush in the air that not even the whispering of the keen edged wind could dissipate. It was as if Nature was holding her breath in anticipation of what was to come.

And Hatfield had a feeling that the whole section was also holding its breath. An air of tenseness and apprehension prevailed whenever men got together, in town or on the range. There was an unwonted reserve in conversation, as if each man were choosing his words with care and forethought, fearful as to how the slightest remark might be construed. There was an increasing tendency to form into groups that avoided close contact with other groups. The babble of talk in saloons would abruptly still when a stranger or a not too well known acquaintance walked past.

"They're taking sides, beginning to line up," Hatfield told himself. "And that's just what is to be expected."

HATFIELD knew that if real trouble developed, it would concern not only the Forked S and the Bradded R. The Mist River country was like any other section. Grudges and resentments existed between old inhabitants as well as between old and new. There were scores to be evened, wrongs, real or fancied, to be revenged. Raines Skelton, the wealthiest and most influential rancher in the section, had undoubtedly trodden on some toes in his time.

Those with sore bunions would remember. Others might well vision possible advantages for themselves through a lessening of Skelton's importance. And among the younger element, Hatfield was sure there were those who felt that Bert Rawlins was not getting altogether a square deal. For after all, there was no real proof that Rawlins had committed any off-trail acts. The chief indictment against him was that he was a newcomer in the section, the purchaser, operator and reviver of a spread an old-timer had let run down to near worthlessness.

"It's a nice kettle of fish, all right," Hatfield told himself morosely, "and how to get the fish out before they boil or spoil

is more than I've been able to figure as yet. But if we can just get past this darn roundup without blowin' the lid off, I've a notion I may have a chance to twirl my twine."

Employing all his plainsman's skill to make sure he was not trailed, Hatfield took another ride south to the desert country. He followed the course of Mist River, south of the canyon, until the dwindling stream finally lost itself in the thirsty sands. He returned from this expedition deep in thought, but wearing a pleased expression.

"I believe I'm riding a straight hunch," he told Goldy as he headed for the ranchhouse. "Not a drowned cow down there anywhere. Of course, they could go down some fork of the river back there in the canyon, but I don't think so. Hardly reasonable to believe, admitting the possibility of the river branching in the canyon, that all the carcasses would go one way. Well, it's up to us to find out for sure about that, but not until after the roundup. No time, or opportunity, now."

HATFIELD did not know it, but others were also impatiently waiting for the roundup to be over. In Pres Morton's room, several of his Arizona riders were gathered with their Boss. A heated discussion was raging.

"We'll lay low till this cow collectin' is over," Morton declared with finality. "Things are too stirred up right now to suit me. That big hairpin over to the bunkhouse is suspicious, and I figger Wagner is workin' with him. Otherwise, why did Wagner make that smart crack about me goin' through a window. I 'low Wagner, bein' young and sort of uppity, couldn't resist takin' a dig at me when he saw my face all cut up."

"Who in blazes is that big tramp, anyhow?" growled one of the hands.

"I figger him for one of two things," Morton returned. "Either he's some smart and salty owlhoot 'lowin' to run his own bunch in here and collect some pickin's for himself, or he's a Cattleman's Association rider. One's as bad as the other, the way we're fixed. He knows somethin' is goin' on, but I reckon he ain't caught on to how it is really worked. That's what we don't want him to catch on to. That's why he's got to be blotted out before he does, some way or other. I ain't felt good since Turner saw him sneakin' around the south mouth of that infernal canyon. What was he lookin' for down there? He's smart as he's salty, don't forget that, and plenty of both. He's got to be shoved out of the way."

"Well, why not shove him out?" growled the hand.

Morton gave him a look of disgust. "Twice it's been tried, and we failed up both times. If you could shoot as fast as yuh can gab, Watts, yuh'd have done for him down there in the canyon."

"How in blazes was I to know he's got eyes that can see through a tree trunk?" demanded the other, angrily. "I still can't figger how he spotted me. I was holed up for fair, but he saw me, and slid outa the hull just as I pulled trigger. Up went his horse, and took the slug, and gave him somethin' to take cover behind. And who the blankety-blank-blank would have thought of that rifle barrel trick he used to come through the brush fire! Sometimes I think the man ain't human!"

"Tell yuh what," suggested another hard-faced individual, "I'll pick a row with him, make it look plumb legitimate, and down him."

"*You* down *him!*" Morton snorted derisively. "He'd take time to roll a cigarette first and still beat yuh to the draw! Be sure yuh have the sight filed off your gun before yuh reach. It won't hurt half so bad when he shoves it down your neck!"

The hand swore angrily, but did not argue.

"We'll get the roundup over first," Morton repeated. "Everybody will be too busy workin' while that's goin' on to start anythin'. That is unless we can manage to get Skelton and Rawlins together for a showdown somewhere out on the range. After the roundup work is done, we'll make a move. I've got somethin' planned that will give certain gents a surprise."

Three days later, without any untoward incident marking the interim, the big roundup got under way. Sheriff Dwyer had been doing some industrious spade work, meanwhile, the result of which was immediately apparent. When the ranch owners of the section met to discuss the details of the cow hunt, Raines Skelton proposed that Jim Hatfield be made roundup boss. No objection was raised,

even Bert Rawlins agreeing with the man he considered his enemy, in this important matter.

When Hatfield was notified of his appointment, he understood perfectly Sheriff Dwyer's little scheme, and permitted himself a chuckle.

"That old jigger has plenty wrinkles on his horns," he thought.

THE truth of which was easily apparent. The roundup Captain or boss is "boss" of the roundup in the strictest sense. His word is absolutely law, no matter if he doesn't own a hoof. The owners of the cows are as much under his orders as any puncher or horse-wrangler. His commands are unquestioned and admit of no argument. His disposition of the riders is final and all differences of opinion are submitted to him for settlement, and from his decision there is no appeal. It is an unwritten law of the range and is backed up to the letter by everybody concerned.

Usually, also, the range boss is a man capable of backing up his judgment himself, without any assistance from others.

In this particular instance, nobody labored under any delusions as to the ability of the range boss to handle things on his own. Owners and hands who had never seen Hatfield regarded with curiosity, interest and respect the man who jailed the Forked S and ran the Bradded R out of town.

"I ain't surprised," said one grizzled old rancher. "Look at them eyes. How'd yuh like to see 'em turned in your direction over the sights of a six-gauge? Gentlemen, hush!"

Hatfield's first act, after selecting the hands he decided upon for his lieutenants in command of the various groups, was to assign riders to the terrains they would work over. As a result, Raines Skelton and his Forked S hands invariably found themselves at one end of the section, while the Bradded R's were at the other and miles away. There was no chance for the two outfits to get together, singly or as a whole, except at the holding spot, and no outfit would think of starting trouble at the holding spot, no matter how strong the inclination. To do so would mean to find every man's hands against them. The holding spot was altogether too important a place to permit of the luxury of private feuds.

The Lucky Seven, old Tolliver Truxton's spread, east of the Bradded R, centrally located, had been designated as the main holding spot and here the collected cows were held in close herd. The troops of cowboys under the designated leaders rode out over the range. Soon these groups broke up into small parties or single units until the hands were separated by distances that varied wtih the topography of the country.

Each man's duty was to hunt out all the cattle on the ground over which he rode, carefully searching for scattered individuals or small bunches. These were gathered together and driven to the holding spot. As the herd grew, the riders changed horses and invaded the concentrated mass of cattle. The new horses were especially trained cutting horses and knew their business as well as did their riders.

The cutting out would begin, calling for skillful and bold horsemanship and involving considerable personal danger. The cows wanted were divorced from the main herd and driven before the tally man. Then, as indicated by their brands, they were distributed among the various subsidiary holding spots, where were the corralling the animals of each ranch.

Here again there was cutting. Cattle wanted for shipping were the beef cut. The culls and the cutbacks were allowed to roam once more. After being properly classified, they were driven to their home range and turned loose. The beef cut was held in close formation.

Calves were branded in accordance with the brand worn by their mother. Out would flash a hissing rope. A startled bawl of the calf. The rope hums taut as the trained horse takes up the slack. The calf is dragged to the fire where the various branding irons are heating. The rider leathers his way along the taut rope to the jumping, bawling calf. "Bradded R!" he shouts. "Bradded R!" repeats the tally man, writing it down in his book.

The cowboy catches the calf under the flank and by the neck. Over it goes, with a bleat of terror. Another hand runs forward and grips a leg. The glowing iron comes out of the fire. There is a crisping and sizzling, the acrid smell of scorched

hair. A bawl from the calf, another bawl as its ears are notched. Off comes the rope.

The calf scrambles to its feet and bleats its way toward its anxious and angry mother, who has been fended away from the scene of operations. The cow licks the wound and the calf quickly forgets all about its unpleasant experience!

WITH the instinct of the born cattleman, Jim Hatfield loved the roundup. The dust, the heat, the sweat, the shouting and the tumult of hectic activity. The day began with the jangling *br-r-r-r-!* of the cook's little nickel plated alarm clock at four in the morning. It ended when the lovely blue dusk sifted down from the surrounding hills. In the blaze of the noonday sun, under the stars of night the work went on in one phase or another.

In deference to the turbulent condition of the section, Hatfield refrained from night drives.

"We'll hold 'em here where we can keep an eye on 'em, after dark," he told the spread owners. There was no argument.

So after the sun had set and the moon soared up in the east, the only sounds of activity were the singing of the night hawks and the steady clump of their horses' irons as they rode ceaselessly around the bunched and sleeping cattle.

And all the while, Hatfield was pondering the problem upon which he felt sure the future of peace or bloody range war for the section depended—the problem which centered about mysterious Mist River Canyon.

"If I can figure that one out, I've a notion the rest will be easy," he told himself. "I've got to get a look into that canyon, somehow or other."

The problem was far from easy of solution. To attempt to ride up the canyon from the south mouth, where the water was shallow, was out of the question. No horse could stand the battering of the current for long.

To enter the canyon from the north would be to gamble his life on the theory he had evolved during hours of painful thinking under the stars. The risk was too great to take save as a final desperate chance when all else had failed.

For Hatfield had a theory, a startling and unusual theory that had its beginning in his belief that there was less water in Mist River south of the canyon than there was to the north. If his surmise was correct, he was up against the most novel form of cow stealing he had ever encountered.

"I've seen some good ones, but if I'm right about this one, it's in a class by itself and darn nigh fool proof," he declared as he lay watching the great clock in the sky wheel westward before the advance of the dawn.

The roundup ended with a careful combing of the brakes and canyons for strays.

"I don't want any hiding cows left behind," Hatfield warned his men. "And there won't be unless there's some bad or careless combing. Get going, now. I'm riding your trail."

The spread owners were elated by the results.

"The best roundup we ever had," they declared. "Morton, yuh don't want to let that feller Hatfield get away from yuh. If you do, one of us fellers will snap him up so fast it'll make your head swim. You don't come on a range boss like him once in a year of Sundays."

"He is—sort of out of the ordinary," Morton agreed, a slight touch of grimness in his voice.

CHAPTER XI

The Canyon Secret

FINALLY all was finished. Each outfit trailed its beef herd and headed for home. As all outfits in the section had participated in the roundup, there were no drifts to be cut out and shoved onto their home range.

Once the beef herds were on their home grounds, they were held close before taking the trail to the various shipping points. The punchers of the section, except those unfortunates who had been chosen by lot to look after the herds, headed for Crater and a celebration.

Hatfield did not ride with the hands. After conferring with the various spread

owners and checking figures, he rode in the general direction of Crater, just as dusk was falling. Before reaching the town, however, he veered to the south. Moonrise found him at the base of the Mist River hills and but a short distance south of the north mouth of the canyon. Lounging comfortably in the saddle, one leg hooked over the horn, he rolled and lighted a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully, contemplating the rugged slopes swelling upward into the moon drenched sky.

He pinched out the cigarette butt and searched about until he found a small clearing surrounded by growth. A thread of water ran across the clearing which was grass grown. He got the rig off Goldy, stored saddle and bridle beneath a bush and turned the sorrel loose to graze. He removed his rope from the saddle and looped it over his shoulder. Then with a last glance around, confident the trained horse would not stray, he headed for the hill slopes.

What Hatfield proposed to do would have been bad enough in the daytime, but with the added handicap of the deceptive moonlight, it bordered on stark, staring lunacy.

Nevertheless, he tackled the slopes, working his way upward by the most practicable routes he could find.

The first two-thirds of the climb was not so bad, although there were places to make the hair bristle on the head. But from then on the going was frightfully hazardous, Hatfield himself clinging with fingers and toes to tiny cracks and ledges in the jagged wall.

Progress was of the snail-pace variety and infinitely tiring. Every crevice and blotch and mottling of the cliff face remained indelibly stamped on his memory. Time after time it seemed he had reached an impasse with further advance impossible. But each time he managed to search out a way, with the risk of certain death constantly attendant, by which he could negotiate a few more feet of the towering battlement.

Hours passed, and at last he reached a point some thirty feet below the rimrock, from which further ascent seemed utterly out of the question. The cliff face was absolutely smooth, unbroken by rift or crevice, unscarred by ledges. Clinging to some knobs of stone, his feet resting on a narrow ledge, he considered the situation, studying the rimrock above, the while.

HIS gaze centered on a projecting spur of stone. It was perhaps a foot in diameter and some two feet in length and jutted out horizontally from the lip of the cliff.

"Maybe it can be done," he muttered, and unloosed the rope from around his shoulders. He built a loop, began twirling the rope.

It was an almost impossible stance from which to make an upward cast, utterly impossible for a roper with less than the Lone Wolf's outstanding ability. But when Hatfield's sinewy arm flipped the loop it spiralled gracefully into the air and noosed the projecting fang of stone. He drew the rope through the hondo, tightened the loop, and tested it as best as he could for security and strength.

The spur seemed firm enough, but if it happened to be loose where the base joined the parent rock—well, there was five hundred feet of nothingness beneath him with the jagged crags below thrusting upward like the teeth of a giant trap.

Drawing a deep breath, Hatfield trusted his weight to the rope. He swung out from the cliff face, with the awful depths yawning up toward him, and the moon-fired rim above seeming a very long way off.

Tensing his tired muscles, Hatfield began the terrible climb. Foot by torturing foot, he dragged his body upward, his fingers gripping the smooth, hard, seven-sixteenths manila that was never intended for rope climbing by moonlight. Once he heard a slight crackling sound above, and set his teeth. If the spur was loosening from the cliff face, he had a very short time to live.

But the sound was either a figment of overwrought imagination or a slight shifting of the loop. The rock held and in another minute he was clambering over the jagged rim to sprawl exhausted on the flat surface of the cliff crest.

After a while he sat up and gazed about. The view was magnificent. To the east rolled the rangeland, the bristles of thickets, the groves and the level pastures silvered and softened by the moonlight. The mountains to the west were a purple mystery etched and bordered by ash and

chrome, their crests crowned in pale flame.

To the south he could view the gray desolation of the desert, appearing as strange and alien to man as the star studded sky above. To the north the black rim of the cliffs stood out dark and ominous, with a void of eternity beyond.

Hatfield got to his feet and headed west across the cliff crest. It was jagged and broken, pitted with holes and crevices, but negotiable even in the uncertain light. A quarter of a mile of laborious walking found him on the dizzy lip of Mist River Canyon.

The moon was directly overhead, but he could see no great distance into the depths because of the swirling, rolling fog that veiled the waters and gave the river its name. He sat down, his back against a lump of stone, rolled and lighted a cigarette and awaited the dawn.

At last it came, scarlet and rose and tremulous gold, firing the mountain crests, bathing the rangeland in saffron light, paling the coppery stars to silver, shrinking them to needle points of steel pricking the blue robe of the heavens. The moon grew wan, her mountains standing out on her sickly face like the bones in the face of a dying man. A bird winged its way through the crystal immensities, its liquid note, a thin pulsing thread of exquisite melody, drifting down to where Hatfield sat. The flaming rim of the sun appeared and light poured over the mountain slopes in a flood.

But it took some time for the sun warmth to suck up the mists in the canyon's depths. Hatfield turned and gazed north. In the strengthening light he noted something that quickened his pulses.

THE north mouth of the canyon was no great distance off. He could see that the mouth of the canyon was cramped. Little more than a hundred yards south of where the river entered the canyon, the gorge opened out abruptly to fully twice its previous width. Hatfield's eyes glowed as he gazed at the unusual formation.

"Looks like my hunch might be a straight one," he remarked exultantly. "Well, we'll soon find out."

He turned and peered over the lip. The mists were gone now and he could glimpse, more than a thousand feet below, the white and silver streak that was Mist River foaming over its rocky bed.

The descent to the water's surface looked hard, but not nearly so bad as the cliff face he had been forced to negotiate to reach the rim. The canyon wall, which was not perpendicular but had a slight outward slant, was cracked and fissured and jutted with ledges.

Hatfield glanced at the sun, tightened his belt and started down. A little more than an hour later his feet touched a narrow strip of sandy beach that bordered the stream. He rested for a while, then boldly entered the river. With another thrill of exultation, he found that the water, even in mid-river, came not more than halfway up his thighs.

He turned up-stream and sloshed along until he was close to where the river poured in a foaming torrent through the cramped mouth to spread out over the greater width of the lower canyon and quickly lose depth and power of current.

"So far so good," the Lone Wolf muttered. "Cows tumbled into the water north of the canyon wouldn't drown before they were swept through the cramped mouth. They'd take a beating, but they'd still be all right when they hit the shallow water down here. The question is, now, does the canyon remain the same all the way to the south mouth, or does it cramp again?

"If it does for any distance, my hunch is strictly off-trail. If it doesn't, I'm riding straight, and certain gents are in for a surprise they won't relish. Well, reckon it's up to me to find out."

He climbed back onto the narrow strip of beach and proceeded down canyon, eyeing the cracked and seamed sides of the gorge with interest.

The sandy beach was not continuous. At times he was sloshing through shallow water. A manifestation he encountered now and then interested him very much. Opposite some of the cracks in the wall, the water was deeper than usual, and here swirls and eddies plucked at his legs. He nodded his head with satisfaction after several such experiences.

"No wonder there's less water down to the south than there is to the north," he chuckled. "Some of those cracks are drains into underground caverns. The

water keeps escaping by way of them, and shrinking the river. That's why it keeps getting shallower all the time."

It took time to cover the more than seven miles to the south mouth of the gorge, although the increasing frequency of the stretches of beach made the going comparatively easy. It was past noon when Hatfield finally sloshed out of the stream and sat down on the bank to rest and dry off. Nowhere had he encountered deep water or hard going.

"Cows would amble all the way down without more than getting their legs wet," he told himself. "They'd keep on going until they got out, of course, with nothing to eat in there. Well, this sort of clears things up. A smooth scheme if I ever heard of one. About the only way to get the critters out of the country, the way the land lies hereabouts, but with them once down here on the desert, to shove 'em on to Mexico, or most anywhere else is plumb simple. Now if I can just out-fox a few gents, things should work out fine."

In a very complacent frame of mind, he set out on the long trudge back to the thicket where he left Goldy.

Just as the sun was setting in a sky of saffron flame, he got the rig on the sorrel and headed for town.

CHAPTER XII

The Trap

HATFIELD found the sheriff in his office. Doc Cooper, the coroner, was also present.

"Got an answer to your wire to Captain McDowell," said Dwyer, and handed it to him.

Hatfield took the message, and read:

THE BOWERS BROTHERS, JOSEPH AND WILLIAM, RETURNED TO THEIR HOME NEAR CHOLA DOWN IN THE BEND WHEN THEY WERE RELEASED FROM JAIL. GOT MIXED UP IN A SHOOTING THERE A FEW MONTHS LATER AND TOOK IT ON THE RUN, PRESUMABLY TO MEXICO. NO FURTHER TRACE OF THEM. NO LINE ON THE OTHERS. DROPPED OUT OF SIGHT AS SOON AS THEY LEFT PRISON.

Hatfield folded the telegram and placed it in his pocket.

"Not much, but something," he commented. "It would seem, from the way they headed back home as soon as they were released, the Bowers boys prefer to work in familiar territory. Chola is no great distance from here, and it's not illogical that they would show up in this section.

"Things are beginning to tie up, and maybe we'll have our chance to drop a loop before long. We'll try and make the chance, anyhow. I'm plumb tuckered out and figure to have something to eat and go to bed, but tomorrow, Sheriff, you and I will ride over to the Bradded R and have a talk with Bert Rawlins."

Hatfield and Dwyer headed for the Bradded R early the following morning. Bert Rawlins' heavy brows knit as he watched them ride up his wagon road.

"Somethin' in the wind," he told his range boss. "That pair ain't comin' here for nothin'. Have any of the boys been actin' up of late?"

"Not that I know of," the range boss replied.

"Well, we'll soon find out," Rawlins predicted. "Wish I knowed just what. When that big feller there shows up, somebody is usually due for a surprise."

The foreman nodded. "Chances they want a palaver with yuh," he remarked. "I'm goin' to make myself scarce. Give a whoop if yuh want me. I'll be out in the yard."

The Bradded R owner was in for a surprise, all right, but somewhat different from anything he expected.

Rawlins ushered his visitors into his big living room and sat down with them. He glanced questioningly at the sheriff.

"Want to have a little talk with yuh, Bert," said Dwyer.

"I'm listenin'," Rawlins replied. "Shoot."

Hatfield was, meanwhile, fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt.

He laid something on the table beside the ranch owner.

Bert Rawlins stared, his jaw sagging. The object was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle! The feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers.

RAWLINS raised his eyes to Hatfield's face. He shook his red head.

"Might have knowed it," he said. "Ought to have knowed it from the start. Yuh act like a Ranger."

"Bert, yuh're talkin' to the Lone Wolf," Sheriff Dwyer interpolated.

Rawlins' eyes opened still wider as he stared at the almost legendary figure whose exploits were the talk of the Southwest.

"Might have knowed that, too," he declared. "Nobody else could have did the things you've been doin' hereabouts of late. The Lone Wolf! Well, what's up? Am I headed for the calaboose?"

"Chances are yuh oughta be," grunted the sheriff, "but not yet, I reckon. Hatfield has a little scheme cooked up he wants yuh to give us a hand with."

"Shoot," repeated Rawlins, "I'm listenin'."

As Hatfield talked, Rawlins' face mirrored incredulous amazement.

"If anybody else was tellin' me that, I wouldn't believe a word of it," he declared. "Of all the dad-blamed things I ever heerd tell of! No, I never would have believed it."

He shook his head, frowned, muttered a few cuss words. But as Hatfield unfolded his plan, Rawlins began to grin. Finally he leaned back in his chair and roared with laughter.

"I'll do it," he chuckled. "Reckon that's one thing me and the boys can do without much coachin'."

"Don't do it too well," Hatfield smiled.

"We won't," Rawlins replied. "We'll do it just right, but I betcha we fool anybody keepin' tabs on us."

"Fooling that bunch isn't as easy as it sounds," Hatfield warned, a trifle grimly. "They've got plenty of wrinkles on their horns."

"Leave it to me," Rawlins assured him. "I'm askin' only one thing—to be in on the shindig when it starts."

"Reckon you've got that coming to you," Hatfield agreed as he rose to his feet. "Well, I'd better be getting back to the Bar M. They'll begin to wonder down there what's become of me. I'm due to make a check on the south range sometime today."

"Most of the boys are driftin' back to their spreads," remarked the sheriff. "with empty pockets and sore heads, but they had a good time and don't mind over much. I'll head up to the Forked S and put a bug in Raines Skelton's ear, so he won't get the wrong notion and do somethin' to tangle the twine."

Bert Rawlins met the sheriff's eyes squarely. "And while you're at it, yuh might tell him I said I'm sorry," he suggested.

Hatfield smiled.

"I've a notion," he said, "this is going to be a pretty nice section for a jigger to coil his twine in."

"And I've got a prime notion who'll be responsible," Rawlins declared with emphasis.

THE next day, about mid-morning, Sheriff Dwyer and his four deputies rode north toward Foster.

"Labor trouble in the railroad yards up there," the sheriff explained as he left his office in charge of a clerk.

Citizens of Crater were convinced that the sheriff had better have let the railroad workers solve their own problems when, shortly before noon, the Bradded R outfit, all but three hands left to guard the big shipping herd, and including Bert Rawlins, boomed into town in a decidedly belligerent mood. They took over at the Last Chance saloon and started an uproarious session of drinking and poker.

"Nobody's runnin' us out of town this time," declared Rawlins. "Let somebody try it, including that blankety-blank Skelton and his bunch of cow runnin' hellions."

Very soon, Crater was in a decidedly jittery condition. The Bradded R's were drinking heavily and getting uglier by the hour. Punchers from other outfits drifted into town, looked the situation over, and quietly drifted out again. They wanted no part of what appeared to be the bloody climax of the Mist River range feud in the making.

Among the visiting cowboys were several of Pres Morton's Bar M bunch, including his range boss, a lanky, taciturn individual who claimed to have hailed originally from Arizona but was always rather vague as to his antecedents. The keen-eyed Rawlins noted that the range boss wore a slightly amused, and decidedly pleased expression as he looked over

the antics of the celebrating Bradded R hands.

As the afternoon and evening wore on, the Bradded Rs scattered out from time to time, ones and twos ambling around to give the other saloons and places a once-over, but always ending up at the Last Chance again, where the main body of the outfit kept close together.

Meanwhile, down on the Bradded R range, the three hands guarding the shipping herd appeared to be having a little celebration of their own. A bottle passed from hand to hand with increasing frequency. Soon song was disturbing the peace of the rangeland, song that should have jangled the nerves of the bunch cows rather than soothed them.

The steers, however, with peculiar tastes as to music, apparently didn't resent the raucous bellowings and settled down to placid contentment as the shades of evening lengthened and the stars began weaving their web of silver across the darkening sky. The three punchers, after a period of noisy wrangling, curled up in their blankets beside a dying fire and soon were snoring.

In Crater, the noisy and combative Bradded Rs kept drifting in and out the Last Chance. The poker game had been roaring for hours and an astonishing amount of whiskey had passed across the bar to the two large tables that had been placed end to end to accommodate the gamblers.

As darkness fell, Rawlins himself wandered out to look the town over. With rather unsteady steps he made his way from bar to bar, gradually working toward the more quiet western part of the town. Finally, when he was sure he was unobserved, he slid down a silent side street and with steps that had abruptly become firm and purposeful, headed for where his horse was tied at a little used rack not far from an empty corral. Three minutes later he was clear of the town and speeding across the prairie.

NEAR where the shipping herd was bedded down, a dense bristle of thicket showed in the starlight. Rawlins approached the thicket cautiously. He showed no surprise when a shadowy figure loomed on each side of his walking horse.

"It's okay," he told Jim Hatfield. "I'm plumb sure they fell for it. The show the boys are puttin' on is sure worth watchin'."

"Hope they don't overdo it," observed Sheriff Dwyer from the other side of the horse. "A gabblin' drunk might give the whole thing away."

"Don't worry," Rawlins reassured him. "The boys are copperlined to begin with, and what nobody notices is that most of the likker goes in the spittoons. Arn Hearn pulled a lulu. Arn ordered a quart for the table, and when nobody was lookin', he pocketed the bottle of red-eye and slid a bottle of cold tea on the table in place of it. Arn had two of them quarts of Chinaman's delight cached in his chaps."

Sheriff Dwyer chuckled. "Looks good, all right," he admitted.

Hatfield glanced toward where the comatose cows were grunting and grumbling in full-fed satisfaction.

"I've a notion it's going to work," he said. "That big herd of prime beef, left unguarded that way, sure ought to be a temptation to any rustling outfit keeping an eye on things. Pretty safe to assume that soon as it got dark somebody was snooping around here looking things over. But I wish the showdown would come in a hurry. This waiting isn't easy on the nerves."

He led Rawlins into the depths of the thicket, where Dwyer's four deputies, plus a half dozen specials, and the three "drunken" Bradded R punchers left to guard the herd were comfortably holed up.

"Might as well take it easy," he told Rawlins. "If they show, the first thing they'll do is throw lead into those blanket rolls there by the fire. That'll give us plenty of warning."

The thicket was ideal for an ambuscade. Over to one side was a little rise, upon which the shadowy outlines of the blanket rolls showed in a faint glow cast by the embers of the fire. Less than a hundred feet from the bristle of growth, the herd, full fed and content, lay in drowsy peace.

Anybody approaching the cattle would be plainly discernible in the shimmer of starlight. In addition, at the edge of the thicket was a great bundle of oil drenched brush ready to flare into flame at the touch of a match. The posse, in the shad-

ows, would enjoy the advantage for which Hatfield planned. All that could be had been done. Now there was nothing to do but await the expected approach of the rustlers.

Slowly the hours passed. Midnight came and went as the stars wheeled westward. Another hour, and Hatfield began to grow decidedly uneasy. He experienced a disquieting feeling that all was not well.

"As I figure it, they should have been here before now, if they're coming at all," he told Sheriff Dwyer. "I don't think they'd risk shoving a herd across the range in daylight again. They came close to getting their come-uppance the last time they tried that, when Rawlins and his hands chased them into the hills. They'd sure have to step the herd along now to get the critters to the river before dawn. Begins to look like my hunch wasn't as good as I 'lowed it to be. But I've still got an ace in the hole."

The sheriff shook his head, and peered eastward.

"Mebbe somethin' happened," he hazarded.

Sheriff Dwyer was more right than he had any notion. Something had happened. Was, in fact, happening at just about that time.

CHAPTER XIII

Last Double of the Fox

OLD Tolliver Truxton's Lucky Seven was the best stocked spread in the section. Not so large as the Forked S, it was even better range and easier to work. Cupped against the eastern hills, it enjoyed an advantage of position that had so far rendered it immune to the depredations of the owlhoots.

Tolliver Truxton was a shrewd cowman. He went in for careful breeding and his beef commanded the best prices the market afforded. Truxton had only one fault. He was pretty easy going and complacent. He had held aloof from the feud that threatened to devastate the section and felt that so long as he did so, he would avoid trouble and losses. Up to the moment, his judgment had proved correct, which had lulled him into a false sense of security.

Tonight, the big shipping herd of prime beef, which was to take the trail the next day, was bedded down in a canyon mouth on his west pasture, where it would be most convenient to start the trek north to Foster.

Three night hawks guarded the herd and had little to do, for the night was warm and still with a clear sky of glowing stars and no hint of wind or rain. The three punchers assigned to the night trick took it easy and paid little attention to what went on around them. Because, so far as they could ascertain, there was nothing going on.

That is, until just after midnight when the three grouped together, lounging comfortably in their saddles for a smoke and a gab.

Jess Ballard, one of the hands, let his lighted cigarette slip through his fingers. The grass was tall and rather dry and a glowing butt was fraught with possibilities of trouble. With a grunt, Ballard swung over in his saddle to retrieve the fallen brain tablet. To that simple incident of chance, he owed his life.

For even as Ballard swayed downward, from the dark canyon mouth burst a roar of gunfire.

Ballard's two companions went down without a sound. They never knew, in this world, what hit them. Ballard also went down, shocked to paralysis by the smash of a heavy slug through his left shoulder. Helpless, all but senseless, he lay without sound or motion beside his dead bunkies. The dark figures swooping from the canyon mouth had no reason to believe that Ballard was not as thoroughly dead as his companions.

Ballard retained enough of consciousness to see and understand what happened next. Through a fog of pain and nausea, he watched the drygulchers lash the cattle to their feet and send them bleating and bawling in wild flight across the prairie. Before he was able to get to his feet, to even move, the herd had vanished in the shadows to the west.

Sick, dizzy, half crazed with suffering, Ballard finally managed to crawl to his horse, pull himself up by the stirrup straps and mount the nervous animal. He twined his fingers in the horse's coarse

mane and sent it scudding for the ranchhouse more than two miles distant.

THE banging of Ballard's gun aroused old Tol Truxton and the Lucky Seven punchers from their slumbers. Ballard slid from his saddle and half crawled up the ranchhouse steps. He was able to gasp out his story before he fainted from pain and loss of blood.

The cook went to work on Ballard. Truxton sent one man racing to Crater and the sheriff's office. He and the rest of his outfit roared westward on the trail of the owlhoots.

"The sidewinders will be headin' for the river, sure as shootin', blankety-blank 'em!" swore Truxton. "If we don't catch up with 'em before they get there our cows will go where the others from this section have been goin'. Sift sand, yuh jugheads! Sift sand!"

It was two hours before dawn when the disgusted and irritable posse in the thicket heard the approach of fast hoofs.

"Somebody comin', and comin' fast," said the sheriff. "He sure ain't tryin' to keep under cover, either. Golly, listen to him yelp!"

A moment later, Dwyer recognized the voice of the whooping rider.

"It's my clerk," he exclaimed. "What in blazes?" He raised his voice. "Here, Porter, this way!"

The clerk crashed up to the thicket, slithered his horse to a stop and dropped from the hull. He panted out his story to an accompaniment of blistering oaths from his hearers.

Jim Hatfield's face set in lines bleak as chiseled granite.

"Out-foxed, that's all," he said quietly. "We never fooled 'em a bit. They caught onto our little scheme without any trouble, made sure that we were holed up here and then hit where least expected. Well, here's where I play my ace. It'll take time for those cows to drift through the canyon. We've got a chance to hit the sidewinders down at the south mouth of the canyon before they collect the steers and shove across the desert. You say it happened around midnight, Porter? Okay, fork your cayuses, gents, we're riding."

"Might have been best to land on 'em down there by the river, while they were waiting for the cows to come through, in the first place," remarked Sheriff Dwyer as the posse got under way.

"Looks that way," admitted Hatfield, "but I'd hoped to bag them without a bad fight. Remember, Pres Morton and most of his hellions have already had a taste of prison life. They'll not go back to serve the long sentences they would be sure to get as second offenders if they can help it. They'll be desperate.

"This means a shootin', with very little advantage on our side, unless I can figure something. Well, there's nothing else for it. I was outsmarted, that's all. I gave Morton credit for plenty of savvy, but he's got a mite more than I figured."

"Nobody can figger out everythin', especially when dealin' with that sort of snake-blooded outfit," Sheriff Dwyer comforted the Ranger. "Don't worry, feller, we'll get 'em!"

In the dark hour before the dawn the posse stormed south across the starlit prairie.

As they rode, Jim Hatfield did some hard thinking. With his uncanny memory for topographical details, he reconstructed in his mind the terrain that approached the south canyon mouth. He evolved a plan, a desperate plan that might very well cost him his life, but which promised the capture of the owlhoots with the least possible risk to his followers.

MILE after mile flowed under the horses' drumming irons. The false dawn fled like a pale ghost across the sky. A faint glow birthed in the east, slowly strengthened. The stars began to dwindle. A soft wind whispered out of the west. As the posse rode in the shadow of the cliffs where the Mist River Hills ended, wan light was shimmering the desert. Objects were taking form, their blurred edges sharpening. It wanted but little of sunrise when they sighted the bulge beyond which was the south mouth of Mist River Canyon.

"Take it easy, now." Hatfield cautioned his men. "Keep in the shadow under the cliffs and walk your horses, slow. If we can make it to that jut without being spotted, we got a chance to put this over."

At a snail's pace the posse closed in on the bulge. Back of the great fang of granite they drew rein. Nothing had happened, and Hatfield breathed easier. He

listened intently and to his keen ears came, above the rush of the river, the sound of voices.

"They're there, all right," he whispered to Sheriff Dwyer. "Now I'm going to try and attract and hold their attention till you fellers can slide around the cliff. I'm going to ride straight south, fast, and curve around them to hit them on a slant. That should draw their fire and give the rest of you a chance to land on them before they know what's going on."

"My gosh, feller," Dwyer protested in a hoarse whisper, "Yuh're plumb committin' suicide!"

"Maybe not," Hatfield replied. "Got to chance it, anyhow. If they hear us coming around the bulge, they'll be all set and knock us over like squattin' quail. This way we may bag 'em without losing too many men."

He hesitated an instant, running his eye over the silent group.

"I could use one more man with me," he said, "but I'm not ordering anybody to take the chance. No, Sheriff, not you. I want you here to lead the bunch."

Bert Rawlins leaned forward, a determined look on his ugly face. "Reckon I've got more interest in this shindig than anybody else here," he said with a finality that brooked no argument. "I'm ridin' with yuh, Hatfield. All set?"

Jim Hatfield gathered up his reins, loosened his guns in their sheaths. On his broad breast gleamed the silver star of the Rangers. His eyes were coldly gray as frosted steel.

"Let's go," he said, and touched Goldy with his knee.

The great sorrel raced forward. Close beside him drummed Bert Rawlins' big black.

They flickered past the ragged jut of the cliffs, sped southward, swerved to the west as a chorus of yells and curses whirled up from the river bank.

"In the name of the State of Texas!" Hatfield thundered. "You are under arrest!"

Running about in wild confusion were nearly a dozen men. Hatfield sighted Pres Morton, his face convulsed with rage and apprehension, bellowing orders. Guns boomed. Lead hissed around the advancing pair.

But Goldy had gone into a weaving, flickering dance that made him and his rider about as elusive a target as a glancing sunbeam. Rawlins' black hadn't been trained to such antics when under fire, but the thunder of the guns convulsed him with a terror that brought on a paroxysm of sunfishing and walking-beaming that was almost as effective as Goldy's dance.

Hatfield's guns were streaming fire and Rawlins was blazing away as best as he could from the back of his end-swapping horse. And with the turmoil at its frenzied height, around the bulge roared Sheriff Dwyer and his posse.

Caught betwen two fires, utterly unprepared for this latest unexpected development, the owlhoots broke in panic. Shootting, howling, they ducked and dodged. Half a dozen were down already. They emptied two saddles as the posse charged home, then scattered in every direction.

Hatfield and Rawlins charged toward them, veering their horses to the east to get the possemen out of line. As they dived into the yelling, cursing, shooting tangle, Hatfield saw a lone horseman flash past at the river's brink. He recognized Pres Morton mounted on his superb roan. He jerked Goldy around, but before he could free himself of the pandemonium that raged all around him, Morton had a good half mile lead.

A quick glance told Hatfield that Sheriff Dwyer had the situation well in hand.

"I'll get Morton!" he shouted to the sheriff, and sent Goldy racing in pursuit.

"Trail, feller, trail!" he urged.

Instantly the golden horse extended himself. His ears flattened back, he slugged his head about the bit. His steely legs shot backward like pistons as he farily poured his long body over the ground. Eyes rolling, nostrils flaring red, he thundered after the flying roan.

But in the tall roan, Goldy had very nearly met his match, and Goldy had already done ten fast miles without a pause for rest. He closed the distance, but slowly, very slowly. Hatfield settled himself in the saddle for a long and hard chase.

"If that devil makes the Rio Grande and gets across, he's mighty liable to give me the slip," he told himself. "Sift sand, horse, sift sand!"

Mile after mile flickered past. The fly-

ing hoofs drummed up the dawn and the lifted irons glinted with the first rays of the rising sun.

And, peering ahead, Hatfield saw what was liable to be more effective in Morton's favor than the speed and endurance of his gallant horse.

Less than two miles ahead, a wavering shifting curtain had magically risen from the desert's face, an opaque curtain, constantly changing form.

Hatfield knew very well what the mysterious appearing curtain was. The wind had risen with the dawn, blowing sharply from the west. Down there it was at gale force and was lifting the loose particles in a blinding sand storm.

"If the hellion gets into that far enough ahead, we'll lose him sure as shooting!" he told Goldy. "Trail, feller, trail!"

Goldy gave his splendid best. Yard by straining yard, he closed the distance.

The dust storm was spreading out as it roared eastward. Morton reached its writhing fringe, was swallowed up in a mist of flying particles.

But Goldy was close behind him, now, and Hatfield could still dimly make out his form through the curdling yellow shadows. He loosened his guns in their sheaths, leaned forward in the saddle.

Morton glanced back, saw that he could not hope to outrun the speeding golden horse. He jerked his roan to a halt, whirled him about and drew his gun. Fire streamed from its muzzle. The reports echoed back hollowly from the sand clouds.

Hatfield answered the owlhoot's fire, shot for shot. It was a weird battle of shadows blasting death at each other through the swirling yellow murk.

But it was almost blind shooting. Lead hissed past Hatfield's face. A bullet burned a red streak along his bronzed cheek. Another turned his hat sideways on his head. He blazed away at Morton with both hands, but the widelooper still sat his horse. Hatfield heard his hammers click on empty shells. There was no time to reload. Straight at Morton's flaming gun he charged.

A slug tore through the flesh of his upper arm and knocked him sideways with the shock. He recovered his balance just as Goldy hit the roan shoulder to shoulder.

Down went the roan! And down went Goldy on top of him. Hatfield and Morton were flung to the sand together.

Morton stabbed his gun forward and fired. The powder flame seared Hatfield's cheek. Death yelled over his shoulder. Then fingers of steel closed on Morton's wrist and doubled it back just as he pulled trigger again.

Morton gave a choking cry and slumped sideways. A hot flood gushed over Hatfield's hand as Morton's soul whimpered out between his blood frothing lips and was gone. Morton had shot himself through the throat.

CHAPTER XIV

The Out Trail

UNSTEADY, Hatfield got to his feet. He gazed at the dead outlaw for a moment, then turned and stumbled to where his panting horse stood. He ripped away his sleeve, managed to fumble the roll of bandage from his saddle pocket and bind up his blood gushing arm, after a fashion. But the blood continued to flow freely, dyeing the bandage scarlet, dripping from his fingers and sapping his strength.

With a mighty effort, he forked Goldy, turned his head north and sent him slogging through the roaring storm.

Swaying in the saddle, gripping the horn for support, Hatfield wondered dully if he would be able to make it out of the storm before he lost consciousness. Or would his bones whiten under the shifting sands, to keep cold company with Pres Morton's till the end of time.

Almost spent, Goldy shambled wearily on. Hatfield sagged lower and lower in the saddle, his eyes dull, his face drawn.

Suddenly, however, he raised his listless head. Somewhere ahead, shots were sounding. With trembling fingers he loaded one of his guns and fired answering signals. Shouts drifted toward him, drawing steadily nearer. Another moment and Sheriff Dwyer and Bert Rawlins burst through the murk.

"Did yuh get him?" the sheriff asked as they ranged alongside.

"He sort of got himself," Hatfield replied. "Reckon the sand will have covered him up by now."

He reeled, and would have fallen but for Rawlins' strong arm about his shoulders.

Hatfield remembered very little about the ride back to Crater, but after Doc Cooper's skillful ministration and a long sleep he felt fit for anything despite his sore arm and a sense of weariness.

"Just a tear," Doc Cooper assured him. "Slug made a clean hole and kept on goin'. Lucky it missed the bone. Yuh won't notice it, 'cept for the scar, in a couple of weeks. Yuh lost a mite of blood, though. That's why yuh feel tired."

Hatfield learned from the sheriff that six of the outlaws had been killed and three captured. Three possemen were wounded, two severely, but expected to recover.

"The cows were stragglin' through and ambling back to the grassland when we left," Dwyer added. "I sent word to Truxton to come down and get 'em. Rawlins set his boys to roundin' 'em up. Well, let's go over to the Deuces Up and eat. Rawlins is there, and Slade Gumbert and Raines Skelton. Reckon they all want to hear yuh tell about how yuh dropped your loop on Morton.

A GOOD breakfast brought Hatfield back to something very like normal. Over the blue trickle of his cigarette, he smiled at his expectant companions.

"Gumbert, you were the jigger I first had my eyes on," he told the saloonkeeper. "You see, I'd spotted you first off for a Mississippi River gambler on the run. I was sure you had worked on the river boats, and I was also sure you had got into serious trouble because of your card playing."

"Why?" asked the sheriff.

"Because he didn't play any more," Hatfield replied. "A man who makes his living at cards doesn't stop playing except for a mighty good reason. I knew something had happened that turned Gumbert from cards. Because it created in him an aversion to the game, and also because he wished to conceal his identity or past. Yes, I had my eye on Gumbert from the start, especially after I was sure he recognized me for a Ranger."

"Saw yuh in action once, down around Laredo, not apt to forget yuh," Gumbert grunted.

Hatfield nodded.

"But Gumbert didn't fit into the picture just right," he resumed. "From the way that bunch gave Rawlins and his men the slip in the hills when they widelooped his herd the day I hit the section, I felt sure that the man running things knew the country mighty well. A lot better than Gumbert could have possibly learned it while he had been here.

"Gumbert looked a natural that night, when he came in covered with desert dust, but so did Pres Morton. He came in showing signs of hard riding that night, too. And, unlike Gumbert, he made no mention of where he had been. Later, I learned his holdings were north of the desert country and there was no very good reason why he should have been sashayin' around down there. Of course, all that didn't mean much, at first, especially not until I had given Gumbert a straight brand."

"After you talked to me the day you were marshal of Crater?" Gumbert observed.

"Yes," Hatfield replied, "the day Morton lured the sheriff out of town by reporting a widelooping that never took place, aiming to set the stage for the showdown between the Forked S and the Bradded R. Another time Morton slipped, because I figured that one out in a hurry. That's why I went to work for Morton."

"Takin' the chance of gettin' yourself done in, at the same time," interpolated the sheriff. "Squattin' down in a nest of sidewinders! Hell an' blazes!"

Hatfield smiled, and resumed speaking to Gumbert. "I wanted to decide about you one way or the other, so I put the thing up to you squarely. You came clean with your story, and I saw you made up your mind to find out, once and for all, if you were wanted in Texas. When I let you know, sort of off-trail, but in a way you understood, that you were not, you looked like another man.

"A gent riding a crooked trail doesn't confess to past trouble. An honest man often does, wanting to get it off his chest, pay up if necessary, and then start over. I blotted your brand off my tally sheet after that talk."

"Tell me," interrupted Gumbert, "how in blazes did yuh know I used to work on the boats?"

"You whistle," Hatfield smiled.

"Whistle!"

"That's right, and you whistle the chants and songs the colored folks working the levees and the docks of the Big River sing. I never heard them anyplace else, certainly not in West Texas."

Gumbert shook his head admiringly.

"How did yuh get a line on Morton?" asked the sheriff.

"Process of elimination," the Ranger replied. "With Gumbert crossed off, Morton became the logical suspect. Morton, born and reared in the section and naturally familiar with the country. Morton, who had dropped out of sight for a number of years and then came back with a vague story of wandering over various states. When we found Bob Hawley's body hanged beside Clem Buster's that morning, I was convinced that somebody was playing the old game of getting two outfits on the prod against each other to cover up his own depredations.

"Morton made his first bad mistake when he used two sections of the same old peculiarly braided tie rope to hang both bodies. That immediately cleared both the Forked S and the Bradded R. Inconceivable that both outfits would own a section of that rope."

"Clear enough," commented Skelton.

YES, the owlhoot brand always slip up on the little things," Hatfield said. "Morton slipped bad again when he cleared that canyon of cows before he had me trapped in there and tried to burn me up. There were plenty of cows in that gorge just a few days before. Morton didn't want to lose 'em, so he cleaned 'em out the night before the day he knew I aimed to work on the canyon. Keeping all his new riders at the ranchhouse with him was also something to think about. He kept the men he had hired and his uncle's old riders separated. And he shoved Billy Wagner and myself into the bunkhouse with the old hands."

"Those five jiggers who served time with him didn't work on the spread?" asked the sheriff.

"No," Hatfield smiled. "They were just a mite too hot. The Bowers brothers were wanted, and so were the others, we're likely to find out. They were holed up elsewhere and Morton sent for them when he wanted to pull something out of the ordinary, like the attempted robbery at the Terlingua Mine. Morton, of course, was Peter Morrow, the safe cracker. Owlhoots often pick aliases sounding like their own names.

"But Morton's first bad slip was his cleverest move. Running the cows through Mist River Canyon to the desert country was mighty clever, but it was the thing that first convinced me that somebody was deliberately setting two outfits against one another. It didn't make sense to think Skelton and Rawlins were pulling such things just to make trouble for each other.

"And when that sort of thing kept up, I got mighty curious about that canyon. Somebody was taking too many chances unless they had considerable to gain. Began to look like those valuable cows weren't just feeding the fishes. So I looked over the south mouth of the canyon, saw that the water was shallow down there because of the greater width of the canyon, and got to wondering how far up that shallow water continued.

"Also, I saw no bodies of drowned cows anywhere down there, which was peculiar, I thought. So I managed to get a look at the canyon farther up, and the rest was simple. All I had to do was drop a loop on Morton."

"Uh-huh, that was all," Sheriff Dwyer remarked dryly. "Well, yuh dropped it, all right, and I reckon we got peace in this section once more."

"And we're goin' to keep it, eh, Rawlins?" Raines Skelton declared vigorously.

Rawlins said nothing, but his big hand stretched across the table to clasp the old rancher's. Jim Hatfield stood up, smiling.

"Well, reckon I'll be riding," he said. "Captain Bill will have another little chore lined up for me by the time I get back to the post. *Adios!*"

They watched him ride away, tall and graceful atop his great golden horse, a light of anticipation in his strangely colored eyes, to where duty, danger and new adventure waited.

"Gents," said Bert Rawlins, "there goes a *man!*"

By LEE BOND

Long Sam slanted his guns up and waited

LONG SAM VENTS A BRAND

ALTHOUGH it was past midnight, there were still people on Vista Verde's main drag. At sight of those late strollers, "Long Sam" Littlejohn swore under his breath, halting the tough old roan horse he called "Sleeper" at the street's east side.

"Half tipsy cowhands and town bums, mostly," Long Sam growled.

He slumped wearily in the saddle, a gaunt, unusually tall man who was dressed in jetty black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. The roan under him stirred, nickered pleadingly as it looked toward a corral that circled a big livery barn.

"Yeah, I know you're fagged out and wolf hungry, fella," Long Sam said sympathetically. "Was a time when we could hit this town, put you in that barn of old Stub Jackson's yonder, and rest ourselves a day or two. Only, Pete Ballard isn't the sheriff down here any more."

Outlawed, with a cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam could never ride boldly into any town.

Outlaw Littlejohn Helps the Toughest Sheriff in Texas!

Even in a town where the local lawman would not bother him, Long Sam still had to be careful, for there were always hombres around who would jump at the chance to collect the reward money on a wanted man's head.

But this Vista Verde was far worse than the average town Long Sam might have hit, for the man who now wore the sheriff's star was an outlaw hater from way back.

Ben Miller, Long Sam had heard the new sheriff called. And if even half the tales about Miller's blind, unreasoning hatred for any man outside the law were true, then Long Sam reckoned he was seventeen kinds of a fool for not just splitting the thickets on to the muddy old Rio, a mile south, and swimming his tired horse across to Mexico.

"With a bunch of owl-eyed galoots still stompin' around the streets, Ben Miller will be up and on the prowl," the gaunt outlaw ruminated. "But if I can slip in yonder to the back of Dan Cooper's Mercantile and wake the old scamp up, maybe I can get what I need without a side-order of blue whistlers throwed in plumb gratis by that Ben Miller fella."

Long Sam fidgeted uneasily, walking his horse quietly along the southernmost fringes of Vista Verde. A big moon hung almost straight overhead, turning the Texas night bright in its silvery glow.

"Somethin' tells me I ought to head south and cross the Rio, grub or no grub," the gaunt outlaw muttered grimly.

But Long Sam did not turn south into the towering walls of brush. He went on west along the edge of the town, until he saw the familiar barn and corral where old Dan Cooper kept his teams. Cooper's black delivery hack was drawn up at the corral gate, and Long Sam had to hold a tight rein to prevent Sleeper from hurrying eagerly toward the corral.

"Sorry, old boy, but you'll have to wait a while," the outlaw said, swinging out of the hand-tooled black saddle.

Long Sam tied Sleeper securely to a bush, then stood there a moment, studying the dark outlines of Dan Cooper's big Mercantile. Scrawny little old Dan Cooper was a bachelor, and had built living quarters on the back of his store. Long Sam hoped he could ease up to Cooper's bedroom window and get the old fellow awake without making too much fuss.

"If I can make Dan savvy who I am before he gets to screechin' too loud, everything will be all right," Long Sam mused.

He skirted past the merchant's corral, smoky eyes keenly studying the hundred yards of open ground between there and the back of the store. He wrapped lean hands around the black butts of matched six-shooters to keep them from bouncing out of leather, then went across the open ground at a run.

Nothing moved within his range of vision, and he was slowing down, stepping into a band of shadow behind Dan Cooper's store, when he saw the sprawled figure of a man.

LONG SAM flattened against the back wall of the store, alert but not jumpy. A man lay stretched out on the ground at the edge of Cooper's small, roofless back porch. Long Sam saw the moonlight glinting on the backstrap of a six-shooter that was holstered on the fellow's right thigh.

"Some drunk stumbled around here and passed out, maybe," the outlaw muttered softly.

He started forward, but had barely pulled his shoulders away from the store wall when he heard a faint, scuffing sound. Long Sam folded down silently, the deadly guns coming swiftly from holsters as he squatted on his heels.

Dan Cooper's back door opened and two men came out onto the little plank porch. One of them was tall and lean, while the other seemed small and gnarled of body, with abnormally long arms and legs.

"Give me that *dinero,* Ike!" the tall one said.

"We could slip us out a bill or two, Bob, and nobody would be the wiser," the spidery-looking Ike declared.

"No you fool!" lanky Bob retorted. "Old Grady Holden drawed a even two thousand dollars from the bank just before closin' time, today. Every cent of it has to be found on that kid, there, when Ben Miller hears shootin' and comes around to investigate."

Long Sam held his breath, feeling sweat ooze out of his pores. The names, Ike and Bob, plus the spidery looks of scrawny Ike, had clicked in Long Sam's mind.

Those two men were Bob Hill and Ike

Dunlap, two of a four-man gang of bandits and smugglers who had kept lawmen on both sides of the Rio Grande cursing their very names for several years. A burly, red-faced hombre named Alf Bishop was the brains of the bunch, bossing this spidery little Ike Dunlap, lanky Bob Hill, and a stocky, moon-faced tough named Ed Taber.

"Here, take the money," Ike Dunlap was snickering. "I sure want to see the expression on Ben Miller's face when he strikes a light to see who you and me caught robbin' Dan Cooper. If you busted Cooper's skull in when you warped yore gun over his bald head, so much the better!"

"You guzzled too much nose-paint before we started this chore, dern you!" Bob Hill growled. "Alf's whole scheme for gettin' a jerkline on Ben Miller would be ruined if I had busted Dan Cooper's skull. Old Dan will be comin' out of it any time, now. I'd better slide this money inside the kid's shirt, then send a bullet through the meat of his leg so's it'll look like one of us nicked him while he was makin' a run out this back door. Soon as my gun cracks, you bust two or three caps yourself, Ike."

"We'll have Ben Miller where we want him, unless that sorrel-topped Milly put too much sleepin' powder in the kid's drink," Ike Dunlap grunted.

"Joe almost come out of it while we was packin' him around here!" Bob Hilton snorted. "That kid will come awake when my slug digs into him!"

Bob Hill stepped toward the edge of the porch, the small package he had taken from Ike Dunlap in his right hand. Long Sam Littlejohn slowly cocked the six-shooters in his hands.

The sharp clicking of hammer dogs was loud in the night's silence, and suddenly Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap goggled towards the black shadows where Long Sam crouched. Hill dropped the package of money, slashing his hands to gun butts as the package fell.

"Hold it, Bob!" Long Sam droned. "You, too, Ike!"

"I see the bulk of the son—in them shadders, there!" Ike Dunlap shrilled.

"Quiet, you half-tipsy fool!" Hill rasped. "I see the outlines of the gent, too. But I heard a couple guns bein' cocked, which means he's got us cold, Ike!"

"That's usin' your head, Bob," Long Sam said guardedly. "You and Ike shed your guns and belts, then hightail."

Long Sam had been careful to speak in a low, flat tone, not wanting Hill and Dunlap to recognize his voice. He slanted his guns up at them and waited now, watching Bob Hill slowly lower his left hand, unfasten a gun-weighted cartridge belt. The belt and pistol thumped the boards a moment later.

Long Sam's eyes switched to Dunlap, watching the spidery, pinch-faced little tough narrowly. Dunlap was fiddling with the buckle that held his gun belt.

"Danged buckle is stuck," Dunlap grumbled.

"No monkeyshines, now!" Bob Hill snapped at him. "The gent in them shadders yonder could blast—Dan Cooper is comin'! Hightail, Ike!"

THE RACKET inside the merchant's living quarters was heard by Long Sam, too. It sounded as if someone had bumped into a chair that tipped over. Then Dan Cooper's voice lifted in an angry oath, and lanky Bob Hill sailed off the porch and went sprinting down the cluttered alley.

But Ike Dunlap was not running. He suddenly dived for the packet of money Hill had dropped on the porch, scooping it up with his left hand. At the same moment, a six-shooter the spidery tough had jerked began throwing thunderous shots into the night!

Long Sam felt the deadly slam of bullets against the wall around him. The gaunt outlaw tried a shot at Dunlap's spidery legs, missed clean, and was slammed hard against the wall by a bullet that ripped across his left ribs. Long Sam's left-hand Colt jumped and flamed then, and Ike Dunlap went sprawling off the porch.

"What in blue-blazin' sin is goin' on out here?" an angry voice yelled.

Long Sam grinned despite the pain in his wounded side. Scrawny little old Dan Cooper had jumped out the back door, a nightshirt whipping around his skinny shanks.

"Easy, Dan," Long Sam said quietly.

The merchant whirled, and Long Sam chuckled at the way his nightshirt

whipped and billowed.

"Take it easy, Dan," the gaunt outlaw called again. "It's me, Sam Littlejohn!"

"What in tarnation happened out here, son?" the merchant yelped.

"We'll talk later," Long Sam said sharply.

He levered to his feet, pushed his guns into holsters and sprang out into the moonlight, snatching up the packet of money he had seen Ike Dunlap drop. Long Sam shoved the money into a pocket, then turned, lifted the lanky fellow Bob Hill had called Joe to his shoulder, and went up the steps.

"Sam, what in blazes are you up to?" Dan Cooper gulped, staring at the outlaw and the limp form he was carrying.

"Inside, man!" Long Sam panted. "If Ben Miller spots me, I'll be in a split stick!"

"By grab, that shootin' will fetch Miller!" Dan Cooper gulped, and jumped forward, swinging the screen door wide.

Long Sam staggered through the doorway, halting as he stepped into a dark little hall.

He heard Cooper come in behind him, letting the screen slam.

"Close the inside door, too, and lock it, Dan," Long Sam said sharply.

He heard the door being closed, then a lock rattled briefly.

"Now, will you tell me what in tunket took place out there?" Dan Cooper snapped.

"I'm not right sure what it was all about, Dan," the gaunt outlaw said, and explained what had taken place.

Cooper was cursing, clutching almost frantically at the paper-wrapped package Long Sam had pushed into his hand. Long Sam eased the senseless man he had carried inside to the floor.

"Keep your voice down, now," the outlaw warned. "I heard men come into the alley out there, Dan. Hunker down here and take a quick look when I strike a match. I want to know who this 'Joe' party is."

"You don't need to bother lightin' a match, Sam," the merchant growled. "I got a good look at that kid when you fetched him up to the porch. He's Joe Miller, Ben Miller's boy."

"Judas!" Long Sam grunted. "Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap aimed for the sheriff to think his own son busted in here and robbed you!"

"Yeah, but what sense did their scheme make?" Dan Cooper snorted. "From what you heard, they aimed to leave Grady Holden's money inside Joe Miller's shirt."

"Are Alf Bishop and Ed Taber around here?" Long Sam asked quietly.

"I'll say they are!" Dan Cooper grunted. "Alf Bishop owns the Texas Star, biggest saloon and gamblin' hall in town. Ed Taber, Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap have been actin' as guards and bouncers around the dive. But what I'd like to know is why Hill and Dunlap tried to get Joe into trouble with that tough daddy of his!"

"Hill and Dunlap evidently aimed to wait out there until the sound of shots fetched Ben Miller to investigate, then tell him they just 'happened' to see somebody runnin' out yore back door and stopped him," Long Sam droned. "My guess is they aimed to hustle this Joe Miller lad inside, here, and 'find' that money on him with only Ben Miller for a witness."

"Ben Miller would beat this kid half to death over somethin' like that," Dan Cooper growled. "But why in blazes would Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap go to such pains to get the boy into trouble with his daddy?"

LONG SAM hesitated a minute before giving answer to Cooper's question.

"Alf Bishop is the galoot behind this scheme, Dan," Long Sam finally declared. "And there was more to it than just gettin' Joe Miller into trouble with his daddy. Say Bob Hill and Ike Dunlap had hustled Joe inside, here, after the sheriff arrived. The boy evidently had been drugged and wouldn't have been able to talk very straight or very clear. If Ben Miller thought his own son had turned crook, how far do you reckon he'd go to keep that kind of a story from gettin' talked around?"

"By grab, Sam, that must have been it!" old Dan Cooper said excitedly. "Ben Miller is a prideful cuss, I reckon he'd crawl through Hades on his hands and knees before he'd want it known that his own son had turned bandit."

"And if a gent like Alf Bishop had somethin' on the toughest sheriff in Texas, that would make that sheriff dance to his fiddlin', then I reckon Alf would be

settin' pretty, wouldn't he?" Long Sam asked drily.

"Great guns!" Dan Cooper gulped. "If Alf Bishop had any such goose-in-a-sack as that, he'd be the king of Texas smugglers inside of a year's time!"

"Alf Bishop and those three side-kicks of his have been too sharp to let any lawman get the goods on them, I know," Long Sam grunted. "Just the same, I'm some surprised that a bandit hater like this Ben Miller seems to be would let that bunch even light in his town."

"Alf Bishop come here nearly two years ago and put in that fancy deadfall of his," the merchant said. "Ben Miller hates his insides, and watches him close. But Bishop and them three toughs of his have behaved, and Miller can't do nothin' but let 'em alone."

"Now that a couple of Alf Bishop's thugs pulled a robbery and tried to frame young Joe Miller, I reckon the sheriff can crack down, can't he?" Long Sam countered.

"We better not let Joe's daddy know he was even around here, Sam," Dan Cooper said uneasily.

"Howcome?" the gaunt outlaw countered sharply.

"Ben Miller is awful hard on this kid," the old merchant explained. "Joe's nineteen or thereabouts, and the only child Ben and his wife have. Ben treats the boy like he was still in knee britches, and will maul the tar out of him if he finds out he's been shinin' up to Milly King."

"Milly King?" Long Sam echoed.

"Milly's a singer, and is the main reason Alf Bishop's Texas Star dive is always packed with bug-eyed galoots," the old merchant snorted. "She's a tiny little trick, red-headed and mighty purty—if a man likes 'em red-lipped, wise-eyed and with plenty of glitter."

"You think Ben Miller would give the boy trouble if he found out he'd been hangin' around Milly King and the Texas Star deadfall of Alf Bishop's, eh?" Long Sam asked.

"I know Ben would work this kid over, Sam," the merchant declared. "I've heard that Joe has a crush on Milly. I didn't put much stock in the tale, figgerin' a wise gal like Milly wouldn't do anything but laugh over a button like Joe shinin' up to her. But it looks like Milly King was maybe followin' Alf Bishop's orders by gettin' the fool kid hooked good. Milly is Alf's gal, and would do whatever he told her to, I reckon."

"Howcome old Grady Holden to leave the money he drew out of the bank here with you, instead of takin' it on out to his Ladder H ranch with him?" Long Sam asked.

"Holden aims to come through town about daylight, pick up the money, and ride on down to Sulphur Valley to buy a bunch of young heifers for sale down there," Dan Cooper explained. "The old dunce was over at the Texas Star before he pulled out of town, and must have wagged his tongue about leavin' the money here. Next time he asks such a favor— Listen!"

Booted feet were slamming hard along the alley behind the building, and a man was shouting Sheriff Ben Miller's name in an excited voice.

"Some feller has found Ike Dunlap's carcass!" Cooper gulped.

"It took that bunch long enough to find Ike's remains," Long Sam snorted.

"Quick, Sam!" the merchant gasped. "I can travel in here without a light, so you pick Joe up and follow me. I'll hide you and him in the store, then tell Ben Miller truth enough to satisfy him but not enough to have him floggin' Joe."

Long Sam did not argue. He picked up the still senseless youth, slung him over one shoulder, then put a hand on old Dan Cooper's thin shoulder and let the merchant lead him down the black hallway to a door that led into the big store. As Cooper opened the door, boots slammed on the little porch at the back of his place and someone began yelling his name.

"Ben Miller, dang him!" the merchant sputtered. "Hike inside, Sam, and keep close to Joe, so's you can shush him in case he wakes up and tries to stir around."

AS HE stepped through into the store, Long Sam heard the door close and locked behind him. The gaunt outlaw glanced around, seeing the fixtures and the filled shelves dimly by moonlight reflected through the big front windows. He moved around behind a counter, laid Joe Miller down carefully, than let his nose and a memory of Dan Cooper's stock lead him to a hoop of cheese and the

cracker barrel.

The outlaw sighed, sat down on the floor with his back to a counter, and began eating ravenously. He finished a thick slab of cheese and a handful of crackers, and was trying to remember which shelf it was Cooper kept the canned peaches on, when the door through which he had carried Joe Miller only a few minutes earlier rattled warningly.

"I tell you there couldn't be anybody in here, Miller!" old Dan Cooper shouted loudly.

Long Sam leaped to his feet, went up and across the room to the hardware department, and slid in behind a heavy, scarred counter that had nail bins in front of it. The door at the back of the room rattled open and Long Sam ducked when he saw yellow lamplight reach along the floor.

"All right, simmer down, Dan," an edged voice was saying. "You admit that the prowler you heard in your bedroom knocked you cold before you knew for sure what was goin' on. Since the money Grady Holden left in your care wasn't stolen out of your bedroom, how do you know the man who struck you on the head didn't take somethin' out of your store?"

"What the heck would anybody be able to lug out of here, Ben?" Cooper asked harshly.

"Maybe some owl-hooter needed grub, or guns out of your rack, or cartridges for guns he already had," Miller began gruffly. "Besides, it's no secret that you sometimes have c o n s i d e r a b l e cash money around. So some galoot could have decided to—*Joe!*"

Miller's voice ended on a startled yell as he pronounced his son's name. Long Sam Littlejohn swore under his breath, hearing Dan Cooper groan as if he had felt physical pain. Long Sam tugged the hat off his yellow-thatched head, crept to the end of the hardware counter and peered around it.

Joe Miller was on his feet, leaning against the counter Long Sam had left him behind. The boy's face was pasty white, and his eyes looked bulged and glassy-bright in the glow of the lamp Cooper was holding.

But Long Sam's attention was riveted on Sheriff Ben Miller. The man was black maned, and had a long, narrow face. His nose was remindful of an eagle's beak, and hooked above a mouth that was thin and tight. Ben Miller's eyes were as black and shiny as greased shoebuttons, and seemed to bug out now as he stood there watching his lanky young son.

"Where—where am I?" Joe Miller croaked the words.

"You're drunk, by thunder!" Ben Miller bawled.

The sheriff lunged forward, grabbed a handful of the lad's shirt front. His face was white now, and there was cold purpose in the way he snaked his son across the top of the counter, then let him drop down to the floor.

"Get up from there, Joe!" Miller ordered, his voice thin and low and hard.

Joe moved sluggishly, clawed at the front of the counter, but slumped back to the floor, groaning as he lifted shaking hands to his temples.

"Let the kid alone, Ben!" Dan Cooper said harshly. "Ain't you got sense enough to see he's doped, not drunk like you're accusin' him of bein'?"

Miller turned, and something in his face made Long Sam reach down, slide his black-butted guns from holsters. The sheriff balled his hands into knotty fists, then shrugged and let them unfold again.

"You found Joe drunk some place and brought him in here to sleep it off," he said, almost gently. "Maybe I ought to 'preciate that, Cooper. But I don't. If you were bigger, and twenty years younger, I'd give you a beatin'. Get back, now, and keep your mouth shut. I'll show you how to handle a boy who disregards a father's advice against swillin' booze."

Ben Miller half turned, put a lean hand on a conical rack that was suspended from the ceiling on a swiveled chain. The rack held buggy whips, and Ben Miller spun it slowly, stopping the rack when he saw a bright-yellow whalebone whip that had a buckskin popper and a lead-weighted butt. He took the whip down, turning grimly back toward his slumped, badly dazed son.

"Blamed if I'll see you horsewhip that kid, Miller!" old Dan Cooper yelped.

DAN HAD pulled on a pair of pants, but his nightshirt stuck out of the back, giving him a weird appearance. The scrawny old merchant stepped to the

counter, set the lamp down above Joe Miller's slumped figure, then stood directly in front of the boy, blue eyes blazing defiantly as he thrust his bald head out on a skinny neck.

"Step out of the way, Dan," Ben Miller said evenly.

"You've got most of the people around here down on you for thumpin' Joe around like he was a sniffly-nosed kid, instead of a man grown!" Cooper said harshly. "So far, nobody has had the sand to tell you that. But *I'm* tellin' you Ben. And I'm also tellin' you that you'll not whip Joe now, unless you whip me off my feet first!"

Dan Cooper was crowding seventy and would weigh maybe a hundred and forty pounds, fully clad. But he stood there with his head thrust out, thin jaws set stubbornly. Long Sam Littlejohn grinned a little, admiring the oldster's pluck. Then Long Sam quit grinning, for Ben Miller reached out, grabbed at old Dan's nightshirt and yanked savagely.

"Get your paws off me, Miller!" Dan squalled, and slammed a skinny fist into the sheriff's face.

"Why, you dried-up old scamp!" Miller snorted, and yanked so hard Dan's nightshirt split apart, baring his bony arms and scrawny chest.

Ben Miller grunted, threw down a chunk of the white cloth that had remained in his hand, and stepped forward, reaching for the old man's thin shoulder. But the struggle had given Long Sam Littlejohn time to cross the room on tiptoe.

The gaunt outlaw was standing close behind the lanky sheriff now, and there was a satanic slant to his mouth.

"Boo!" Long Sam said harshly.

Ben Miller whirled, eyes goggling. He made a yelping sound as he saw and recognized the gaunt, black-clad man standing there. Miller dropped the whalebone buggy whip, hand slashing for the gun on his right thigh. Long Sam's grin got more wicked, and he loosed an uppercut that smashed against Miller's jaw, jerking his boots clean off the floor.

Long Sam wrenched the pistol out of Miller's hand, then stepped back and tossed the gun behind a counter. Ben Miller came to his feet slowly, white patches at the corners of his mouth as he measured Long Sam thoughtfully.

"Come on, tough boy," Long Sam droned. "You can likely land a punch or two, if you try. Or have you got nerve enough to fight anybody besides a kid who is just learnin' to shave, or a scrawny oldster like Dan, there?"

"I see blood on the side of your shirt and a bullet hole through the cloth," the sheriff said slowly. "You were mixed up in that shootin' out behind Dan's bedroom tonight, eh, Littlejohn?"

"Alf Bishop meant to burn the outlaw brand onto this button of yours, Miller," Long Sam said gruffly. "I vented the brand before it could do Joe any harm."

"What in thunder are you talkin' about?" the sheriff asked angrily.

Long Sam told him, bluntly and without hesitating any. He saw the sheriff pale, and saw old Dan Cooper scowling and squirming and shaking his sore head in disapproval.

"So that's howcome Joe's in here, Miller," Long Sam finished gruffly. "But keep on thumpin' that boy around the way you seem to have been doin', and he'll wind up in serious trouble yet."

"You bounty-plastered scum!" Ben Miller croaked. "Do you think I'd take your word for this?"

"Whether you believe me or not, doesn't matter," Long Sam snapped. "After I've paid Dan for some supplies I need and head for Mexico, you can collar Bob Hill and put the screws on him. Get a gent like Hill in a tight, and—"

"And you'll likely wind up wishin' you hadn't!" a cold voice cut in. "Elevate, all three of you!"

QUICKLY, Long Sam turned his gaze toward the door that led into the living quarters Dan Cooper had built on the back of his store. Alf Bishop was stepping through that doorway, an ornate six-shooter jutting from his big, flabby hand.

The burly, red-faced man's eyes were slitted and glittering, and there was dangerous tension in him as he strode into the room, letting lanky, hatchet-faced Bob Hill and dumpy, moon-faced Ed Taber come through the doorway.

"Slide to the front and yank them blinds over the front winders, Ed!" Bishop said sharply. "You, Bob, get around behind

Littlejohn and lift them guns out of his holsters."

"And the first one of you that takes a step to obey Bishop's orders, gets shot!" Long Sam said coldly.

Bob Hill's slate-colored eyes squinted, gleaming angrily as he looked at Long Sam. He had a six-shooter in his hand, as did Ed Taber. But they both hesitated, glancing at Bishop.

"You fool, there are three of us, and we've got the cold drop!" Bishop flung the words at Long Sam.

"That's right," the gaunt outlaw chuckled. "But you know I'd live long enough to shuck these guns and get off a shot, even if all three of you poured lead into me, Alf. And guess who's pretty, brocaded vest would get dusted with my slugs!"

"Put those guns up, you three!" Sheriff Ben Miller found his voice at last. "Bishop, what's the idea in this, anyhow?"

Bishop flinched, some of the ruddiness leaving his face as he stared at Ben Miller. Long Sam laughed, the sound low and hard and mocking.

"See what a mess you've made, Alf?" the gaunt outlaw taunted. "Milly did her work well enough—Joe's still out. He hasn't told his daddy anything. But you didn't know that. When Joe wasn't found out there in the alley where my lead piled Ike Dunlap up, you got panicky, thinkin' Joe had regained his wits and would maybe remember things that would have Ben Miller on your neck."

"The long-shanked son is right, Alf!" Ed Taber said in a thick, gruff voice. "That blamed kid couldn't have spilled the beans, for he's sure still dead to the world!"

"And ain't we bit off a chaw by overplayin' our hands!" Bob Hill gulped. "My gosh, we've got to—"

Hill broke off, swallowing hard as Bishop turned his head, glared at him.

"You three apes have got to try shuttin' the mouths of Ben Miller, Dan Cooper and young Joe Miller, and shuttin' them plumb permanent," Long Sam clucked. "I don't count. The testimony of a bounty-plastered galoot like me wouldn't be accepted by any court."

"But the bounty on yore hide will end up in our pockets, Littlejohn!" Bob Hill snapped. "It'll be a pleasure for me to twist a slug into your middle, you tricky son!"

"Only, Bishop doesn't want any shootin', right now," Long Sam said, grinning coldly. "That bunch of galoots pressin' their noses to the window glass, yonder, have already seen too much."

Alf Bishop and his two hirelings swore in unison, their faces tightening as they glanced toward the front windows. And the moment the three pairs of eyes turned away from him, Long Sam Littlejohn plummeted down to the floor, throwing his gaunt body toward a stack of sacked flour as he flipped guns from holsters.

Bob Hill whirled and fired first, a raging oath on his lips as he realized that he and the other two had been tricked. Long Sam's big guns belched flame and Bob Hill died with that oath on his lips.

But Alf Bishop and Ed Taber were shooting now, their slugs spurting flour into Long Sam's face as they ripped through the ends of the sacks. Sheriff Ben Miller plunged down beside his son, snatching at the gun in Joe's holster. Old Dan Cooper seized the whalebone whip Miller had dropped to the floor earlier and brought the loaded butt of it down hard across the sheriff's black-thatched head.

Long Sam saw that in the seconds while he crouched behind the flour, spitting the stuff out of his mouth and trying to blink it out of his eyes.

"Circle left, Ed!" Alf Bishop bawled. "Get to where you can smoke that hellion out from behind that pile of flour sacks!"

Long Sam waited until he heard Ed Taber start running around the far end of the stacked flour, then slanted his left-hand Colt up and caught Taber in the face with a slug before the stubby gunman could crack a cap. Long Sam reared up then, a gaunt, white-splashed apparition with a smoking six-shooter in each bony fist. He rocked drunkenly when a bullet ripped across his left cheek, then sagged forward when Bishop caught him along the right flank with another bullet.

BUT LONG SAM'S six-shooters were still roaring, and across the room he saw big Alf Bishop twist suddenly, take two uncertain steps towards a counter, then pitch down, coughing a spray of blood onto the floor.

"Sam, you're hit, son!" little old Dan

Cooper yelled, darting to the gaunt outlaw's side.

"Yeah, I'm hit," Long Sam gulped. "But I'm gettin' my breath back, so likely I'm not hit too hard. Why in thunder did you knock Ben Miller on the head?"

"That cuss was gettin' hold of Joe's gun!" the merchant gulped. "He's got a one-track mind where outlaws are concerned. I was afraid Ben would turn that gun on you, if he got hold of it. We'll have to hide you some place until—"

"Until I get over this headache and can thank the bounty-plastered, noose-dodgin' cuss for pullin' this boy of mine out of the fire tonight," Ben Miller broke in drily.

The sheriff got up slowly, holding his left hand to the back of his head. He grinned in an odd way, and there was a grim kind of amusement in his bleak eyes as he saw Long Sam's guns swivel towards him.

"Put the guns up, Sam," he said quietly. "I'll sift. And I'll tell Doc Saddler to waltz down here and take a look at Dan's cracked noggin'. If Doc was to find somebody else back yonder in Dan's bedroom that needed some patchin', too, that'd be his business."

"Yeah, and you'd be stickin' yore punkin' head through one of my winders, with that cussed eight-gauge buckshot gun, you squinch-eyed galoot!" Dan Cooper said harshly.

"Hush up, Dan, before I happen to remember who assaulted which officer tonight with the loaded end of a buggy whip," the sheriff chuckled drily. "Littlejohn has got my word that I won't even peek inside your bedroom for the next week or ten days."

There was a crooked grin on the sheriff's hard mouth as he looked levelly at Long Sam.

The gaunt outlaw's pain-drawned face twisted in a smile, and he slowly pushed his guns into holsters.

"Your word is good enough for me, Miller," Long Sam said evenly.

"Thanks, Sam," the sheriff said hoarsely. "That sprout of mine means the world to me—so much, that maybe I've been too harsh with him, just fearin' he'd make some kind of fool mistake. You and Dan said things to me tonight about the way I've handled Joe, that hurt. But the things you said made me think, too. Some day, I'll say my thanks when I get the thing all hammered out in my own bonehead and really understand it.
And I'll make it up to Joe, too."

THE sheriff turned jerkily, went down the room and out through the back part of the building. Old Dan Cooper let out a slow breath, turned amazed eyes on Long Sam.

"I never thought I'd see that cuss eat crow over anything, Sam!" the oldster said gravely. "Do you reckon you could trust him, son?"

"If you've still got that spare bed in that big bedroom you built back yonder for yourself, I'd like to stretch out until the sawbones gets here," Long Sam said wearily. "And don't worry about Miller botherin' me. A man like him doesn't break promises. Miller knows that his life would have been hell on earth if Alf Bishop had got away with brandin' his son an outlaw. I'll be plumb safe here, even if Ben Miller is the toughest sheriff in Texas!"

Man Tamer of the SAND HILLS

"Charge, boys, charge!" Arrington yelled. "Kill 'em with Colts!"

by HAROLD PREECE

The exciting true exploits of Ranger George Arrington, scourge of the Comanches!

THE three men perched like vultures on top of the sand hill. Their keen eyes gazed from behind their bandana masks at their approaching kill. A hundred yards down the trail moved their prey—a covered wagon with pots and pans roped to the sides, with kids' heads peeping out from beneath the tarpaulin.

One of the masked men pointed toward a deep hole in the trail. "They'll sink in clear to the hub when they hit that," he said. "Then we'll corral 'em and fleece 'em."

"Ought to be carryin' a big wad to git their start breedin' grasshoppers," a second man said and chuckled.

"Robbin' them nester wagons is a whole lot healthier than robbin' stagecoaches with them guards roostin' on top," said the third bandit.

Then the wagon hit the hole, and the horses strained to pull their haunches from the deep-engulfing sand. The driver's whip cracked across their backs. Three bullets cracked against his skull. A woman found herself a widow; six youngsters found themselves orphans.

The woman looked down at the dead, bleeding face of her husband slumped in the seat. She looked up into the masked, grim faces of the outlaws, their hands drawn on the triggers waiting to wipe out that whole family come to the Texas Panhandle for a new start.

Rangers to the Rescue

The mother and the children screamed. "Shut up, you pack o' barn cats," bawled the first outlaw. "And hand over the dough!"

From her bosom, the woman pulled out a worn leather wallet. She was handing it to the bandit chief when he suddenly dropped from his pony with a silly smile.

Shots were pouring from another direction on the outlaws. The second bandit fell, groaning in agony as he struck the ground. The third outlaw spurred his cayuse and tried to get away. But the horse stumbled and fell in the deep sand, its master pinned underneath.

Six more horsemen charged from behind another sand hill. Their determined faces were honest and they were not masked. On the leather vest of each hung a big star.

Their leader was a tall man with a twisted, long moustache and a forest of chin whiskers hanging beneath. He was yards in advance of his comrades. And his Colt .45 was talking law talk. For the second outlaw kissed Texas good-by when he struggled to his feet and got a bullet through his throat.

The tall man rode rapidly to the wagon. His big black Stetson came off when he saw the dazed woman and the scared kids. "Sorry this happened, ma'am." He spoke in low tones. "Sorry the little fellers had to go through it.

"But plantin' them varmints is our job, like plantin' wheat and cotton'll be yours. My boys'll pull you out of this hole and set you rollin' toward your claim. I'll ride into Fort Elliott and git a preacher to give your man decent burial."

"Thanks—thanks, mister," the woman gasped weakly. "What might be your name?"

"The name, ma'am is Arrington—George W. Arrington, Captain, Company C, Texas Rangers, at your service."

The wagon rolled on, driven by a pioneer woman who'd be burying the dead husband at her side before she'd be sowing the first rows of wheat and cotton.

The outlaw who'd been caught under his horse was also dead now.

"All right, Joe," Arrington ordered a ranger. "Unstrap your shovel from your mount and start grave diggin'."

It was not the first time, this bitter fall of '79, that Ranger George Arrington's gun had talked law talk that was lead talk to the bloody bands pillaging homesteaders in the newly-organized counties of the Panhandle. He'd scoured the sandhills for thieves and killers. He'd killed 'em and buried 'em from Sweetwater to Tascosa, from the Brazos River to the Red.

Arrington Wars on Outlaws

He hated outlaws like settlers hated the grasshoppers that chewed up their crops. At thirty-five, with four years of Ranger service behind him, he valued the life of an outlaw no more than a settler valued the life of a grasshopper.

"I have tested him thoroughly in the management of men, in commanding detachments, and in his capacity for business, and think him well qualified. . . ." So his superior, Major John B. Jones, had written the Adjutant General in Austin, the year before, recommending his promotion from ranger sergeant to ranger lieutenant. When he was ordered to the Panhandle, the major saw that he went with a captain's commission.

South Carolina-born John Jones liked Alabama-born George Arrington. Each had served gallantly in the Confederate Army. Each was slow-talking and quick-shooting.

Arrington had nearly got through cleaning up the homesteader robbers when Major Jones sent him orders from Fort Griffin to clean up the Comanches. It

was a tough order and a big order. It might mean Texas Rangers swapping shots with U. S. Army forces protecting the Comanches, swarming into the Lone Star State on "hunting permits" issued by the Federal Government.

But George Arrington always tackled everything that Texas needed doing. On a raw, bleak Christmas Day, he led seventeen rangers toward Pease River where the red "hunters" were gorging themselves on the cattle herds of the new ranches.

"Sorry you boys will have to eat frijoles and bully beef for Christmas dinner," he told his men. "But I reckon the Christmas angels never had seen no blasted, thievin' Comanches when they was flyin' around, singin' peace and goodwill."

For two weeks, Arrington's eyes followed the Indian signs—tell-tale rocks arranged in little pyramids to mark the plunder trail for other marauding braves, the dead body of a settler scalped by Comanches and half eaten by the giant gray wolves out there on the Staked Plains. So that he said nothing when his scouts slew a stray Comanche sagamore and tacked the scalp as a warning on the trunk of a cottonwood tree.

They were snowed in three days at Pat O'Brien's ranch on Pease River. As Arrington sat with his host by a cow dung fire in the ranchhouse, something that he had turning over in his mind while drinking his host's good coffee, finally slipped from his lips.

"Pat," he drawled. "This here is still mostly desert country. Them redskins swarm down here so thick because somewhere they got a waterhole where they can tank up for their raids. If I could locate it, I could cut 'em off there before they got any further."

The genial Irish rancher laughed it off. "George," he answered. "When you find it, let me know. I'll drive my steers straight to it and there won't be nary a drop left for no Comanches."

Charge Indian Raiders

But the idea was buzzing in George Arrington's mind, like the sandflies were buzzing around his face, one January morning when they came upon a camp of fourteen lodges and a herd of a hundred and fifty stolen horses in a secluded draw.

The Comanches were lounging on the ground about fifty yards from the ponies.

"Charge, boys, charge!" Arrington yelled. "Kill 'em with Colts! Kill 'em with carbines! But kill 'em."

The hoofs of the swift Ranger cayuses thundered into the Comanche camp. The surprised braves were cut off from the horses they'd stolen from the Pease River ranches. Some of them died under the sharp shod feet of the lawmen's ponies. A few jumped to their feet and ran to a sandhill to make a stand.

A tomahawk whizzed toward Arrington. A bullet from his high-powered carbine cut the sharp metal blade squarely in two. The Ranger commander's carbine barked five more times. And five Comanches went tumbling down the sandhill.

"Up and at 'em, men!" Arrington commanded. And again the prize Texas stallions thundered across the prairies. Arrington, in the lead, picked off two more Comanches who died with loud, coughing grunts.

The Rangers were at the foot of the sandhill ready to spur their horses up the low ascent when the sound of a bugle cut clear across the shooting. The surviving Comanches lowered their guns and so did the Indians. Firing ceased.

A tall Indian wearing the decorative cow horns and the orange-red paint of a chief called down mockingly from the hill top in mixed Spanish and English.

"*Trabajar bien* (good work), *mi capitano Arrington.* You kill many my braves. But *los soldados de Tio Sam* (the soldiers of Uncle Sam) come. Then they kill you for killing Injuns."

Arrington looked across the Plains. Nine Army cavalrymen were galloping toward the battle scene, their service rifles cocked, ready to kill the rangers for raiding the Comanches because some foolish brasshat in Washington had so commanded. Then his carbine swung into position again. It was pointed directly at the heart of the Chief. And every one of his men had drawn a bead on some warrior.

"Speeches be hanged," roared George Arrington. "Now you tell me where you git your water while you're on these stealin' parties or every one of you gits

a ticket to the Happy Huntin' Ground." His hand slapped down hard on the barrel of the carbine.

Soldiers Save Indians

The chief's knees began sinking. His trembling finger pointed west. "Over there, *capitano mio!*" he stuttered. "Over there—many miles ride are the Lost Lakes! I tell. Now you no shoot!"

By that time, the soldiers had spurred up to the sandhill. Arrington and his Rangers doffed their Stetsons when they saw the Stars and Stripes in the hands of the color sergeant.

Arrington exchanged salutes with the young lieutenant commanding the soldiers. "Captain," the lieutenant said, "I sympathize with you. But I'm only acting under orders from Colonel Davidson at Fort Elliott who gets his orders from Washington. You've killed wards of the government. I'll have to turn over every one of your names to the U. S. District Attorney in Fort Worth to be charged with killing people under the protection of the American flag."

There were memories of Bull Run and Vicksburg and Lookout Mountain on George Arrington's face as his eyes looked at his country's ensign. And when he spoke, it was in reverence:

"Lieutenant," he said, "I fired on that flag for four years. But it was a family quarrel, and not to help Indians butcherin' people who were the other half of the family. When Texas and the South lost, I gave my word I'd never fire on it again."

Then he pointed to a tiny Texas flag on the saddlehorn of a Ranger corporal. "But, suh, Texans fought under this flag before they fought under that one. And Texas is still a country, not a Comanche huntin' ground. If Texas can't protect itself under the flag you carry, it'll protect itself under the flag we carry. Your servant, suh!"

A Federal grand jury in Fort Worth voted "no bills" and "good riddance" when it considered the cases of George Arrington and his Comanche-killers. It demanded that the U. S. troops leave Texas if they protected Comanches who killed Texans. And, suddenly, the "hunting parties" started fording the Red River back into Indian Territory.

George Arrington figured they were going back to arm for an all-out invasion of Texas until he bumped into the notorious gunman, Clay Allison, on the streets of Sweetwater.

Hs stopped short.

"Howdy, Clay!" he growled. "Sorry I ain't got orders to arrest you."

Ordinarily, Clay Allison would have taken that for shooting talk. Arrington's hand was on his Colt as he glared at the gunman. But Allison beamed and stuck out his hnad.

Allison Declines to Fight

"No, George!" he said. "I ain't startin' nothin' with you—not with what the Comanches are sayin'."

"What are they sayin', Clay?" Arrington barked.

Allison hee-hawed. "They're sayin' American soldiers *muy buenos* (very good). But George Arrington and Texas soldiers *no buenos por nosotros* (no good for us). That's because Colonel Davidson's sent out his men to warn 'em agin the Texans and to escort 'em across Red River."

"Thanks, Clay," Arrington replied. "Keep your face clean or I'll wipe it for you."

After he'd left, Allison remarked to a crony: "George Arrington's the only peace-officer in the whole West I wouldn't talk up to. He's the only man in the West I consider my equal."

Back at Ranger headquarters, Arrington was thinking about the Comanches. He knew they'd be slipping back into Texas when reservation rations got slim. He decided to find their hidden sources of water.

For months, he and his men searched for the fabulous Lost Lakes in territory untrodden by white men since its discovery by the Spanish explorer, Coronado, three hundred years before. It was desert country they rode through, with never a sign of life except a lizard crawling across the sand or an eagle flying high in the sky.

Wagons and packmules carried water for his men. When their grub ran out, they burnt the thorns off prickly pears and then roasted the thick giant cactus

leaves in ashes.

They discovered and named one lake after the other—Cedar Lake, Rich Lake, Silver Lake and, after themselves, Ranger Lake. But as Coronado, centuries before, had sought the Seven Golden Cities of Cibola in this same dreary desert, so they still sought the Lost Lakes. For Captain Coronado and Captain Arrington were brothers in spirit, even if one was a Texan and the other man a Spaniard—even if three hundred years divided them.

Then, suddenly, Arrington realized that every lake he found was one of the Lost Lakes. The Indians had followed a regular route that led from one lake to the other.

The Ranger captain was a religious man like his friend, John Jones. On a night when a blizzard raged, he knelt by one of the lakes and thanked God for favoring him with the joy of discovery. But God had turned away His face from Coronado.

Hailed as Explorer

When Arrington got back, he found the papers praising him for being one of America's great explorers as well as one of its great officers. Scientific societies of learned men sent wires and telegrams to the man who'd had little schooling, asking him to come and lecture.

The Governor of Texas and the Governor of New Mexico both declared that George Arrington's discovery meant bringing settlers to the desert. For water could be tapped from the lakes to grow crops and cattle.

And unwittingly, the Ranger commander had crossed the unmarked boundary into New Mexico when he'd found the last lake.

But he had no time to lecture, no time to be dined and decorated by Texas and New Mexico officials. He was a plain man. He still had work to do in the new counties and the new towns that plain people were still founding in the Panhandle.

His yellowed old reports in the Texas capitol tell the story of his last four years in the Rangers.

"Reached Fort Griffin and jailed my prisoner."

Or "Am going after one of Millett's bad men."

He'd been a top cowhand before he started his eight-year hitch as a Ranger. His hands itched for the throw-rope and the branding iron.

In the summer of 1882, he felt he'd finished his job of taming the wild men of the sand hills. He'd wiped out the last straggling bands of Comanches, making their last stands by their ancient waterholes. They were gone forever from Texas. So were all but a few of the organized gangs that robbed and killed hard-working ranchers and nesters.

He resigned to become manager of the vast Rockingchair Ranch. But he'd no sooner turned in his star than his neighbors in Wheeler County made him put on another. He begged people not to vote for him, but still he got elected sheriff.

He went after the last rustler gangs prowling the Panhandle. He smashed a big ring of cattle thieves shipping prize steers by rail. He went clear to Massachusetts with extradition papers to get one of them. He changed trains every hundred miles on a zig-zag route coming back, so lawyers couldn't stop him and free his prisoner with legal rigmarole.

But he'd answer questions only with his inevitable reply, "I jailed my prisoner," after he'd clamped the rustler in the penitentiary.

He was sheriff eight years. Then he finally persuaded his neighbors to give somebody else the job. It was good to drop the shooting-iron and take up the branding iron.

He died March 31, 1923, at the age of seventy-eight, on the eve of the great Panhandle oil booms. Maybe, he died just in time.

It would have riled him about being too old to handle the toughies who came tearing into the Panhandle when the oil came tearing out of the ground.

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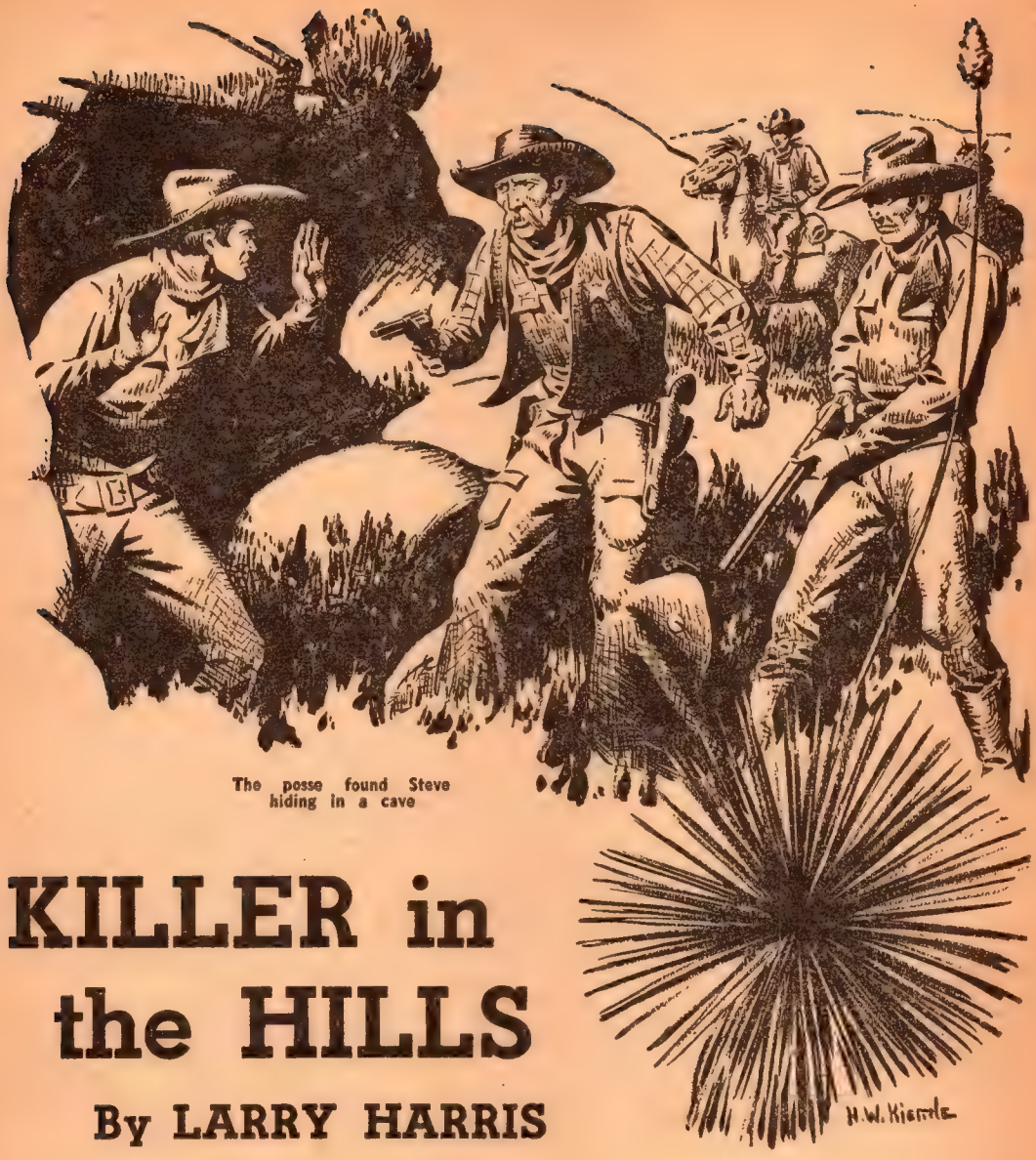
NEXT ISSUE

TOP MAN

***The True Story of Ranger McDonald by* HAROLD PREECE**



The posse found Steve hiding in a cave

KILLER in the HILLS

By LARRY HARRIS

Can a sheriff shoot an outlaw—if the outlaw's his own son?

THE sinking sun daubed the higher timbered peaks a purplish hue, while the pinon-dotted canyons lay gloomy in blankets of shadow. In the hush of eventide the dark scrub cedar, flanking the deer trail that old Ike Kelsey was following, reminded him of funeral shrouds.

Where the trail dipped down into the broad mountain valley, Ike Kelsey drew rein, staring dully at his weather-beaten ranch buildings below. Smoke spiraled lazily from the rock chimney of the house, rising into the chill evening air and then vanishing. Somehow that vanishing smoke reminded Ike Kelsey of his fondest hopes.

"What is to be, will be," he remembered the long-legged itinerant sky-pilot inton-

ing voice. "And no living man can change it."

He rode slowly on down the trail, a badger-gray little man long past his prime. He rode with more than physical weariness, for the torture in his eyes told of a spiritual hurt that far transcended all bodily pain. His deep-lined face was ashen and the bullet wound in his shoulder filled his entire body with streamers of fire.

He was reeling from loss of blood as he drew near the ranch buildings. From the gallery of the house he heard a shout and knew it was Garcia, the loyal old Mexican who helped him with the ranch chores. The Mexican was at his side, red-veined eyes freighted with fear as Ike Kelsey slipped weakly to the ground.

"This is one time when you'll have to tend to my horse, Garcia," Kelsey said dully.

"You've been shot, Senor Ike!" the Mexican cried. "I must tend to you first."

"No, Garcia, my horse comes first."

IT WAS Ike Kelsey's way and always had been. Very slowly he walked to the front porch, his right arm hanging limp, his fingers wet with blood. Inside the living room he sat down in a rocker and closed his eyes. He was never conscious of his old hat falling to the floor. Later, when Garcia hurried into the room with a pan of hot water and bandages, Kelsey opened his eyes.

"The shoulder bone is broken, Garcia," he said quietly.

"It will be a long time in mending, Senor Ike."

"It makes no difference, Garcia."

"You got the rustler you went after?"

Ike Kelsey turned his pain-shot eyes toward the front window as the Mexican bathed the ugly wound. Outside he saw the darkness closing in, and later he was aware of Garcia lighting a lamp in the room and the smell of antiseptics came to his nostrils. And old Ike Kelsey knew that night had come to his little valley, and the darkness filled his life. But he pictured the crisp morning to come, the dew on the meadow grass sparkling in the bright sunlight. It would be a new day for Ike Kelsey, and he'd go about his business of living—for that is the way he willed it.

"You got the rustler," he heard Garcia ask.

Ike Kelsey closed his eyes against the awful hurt, a mental pain unlike anything he had ever known. "I got him, Garcia," he whispered. "He winged me, then I killed him."

It was a long time before either man spoke again. Long after Kelsey's wound was dressed he remained in the rocker. He heard Garcia stirring around in the kitchen, preparing some hot beef broth. When the Mexican re-entered the room, Kelsey said in a queer, tight voice:

"Steve will be coming home soon, Garcia."

The Mexican's eyes widened and some of the tension went out of his face. "Steve?" he asked, surprised. "But that should make you happy, Senor Ike. You must forget your wound. We mus' celebrate when he gets here."

Ike Kelsey was not listening to the Mexican. He was staring at the darkness outside.

* * * * *

The coffin lid of Ike Kelsey's memories was open, and in moments of half wakefulness, he relived the past twenty years. He and Big Jim Mulvaney were partners on a 12-section cow spread, and then Big Jim pulled out and got married. Even though they separated, the deep roots of the everlasting friendship remained firm.

"You should marry, Ike," Big Jim chided. "You're forty-four and time's slipping past. Don't wait too long. My wife and I are moving up into the Guadalupe country of New Mexico. We figger we can do better up there. Why don't you move up with us?"

Ike Kelsey was a foot shorter than big, strapping Jim Mulvaney. Their closeness was of the quality that comes to men who have shared the same joys, fights, bottles and danger. In his slow, quiet way, Kelsey said:

"I think I'll stay on a while here, Jim."

So Jim Mulvaney and his bride moved to New Mexico, and never was Mulvaney to know of the abiding love that Ike Kelsey had for Janice Alton, a young widow who lived in a nearby town.

Her husband died a year after their son was born, leaving Janice an old frame

house in Mariscal, debts and unpleasant memories of his wild, fighting, drunken orgies.

For two years Ike Kelsey courted Janice Alton with all the tender devotion a man can know. When she took ill, Kelsey had the horrible, intuitive feeling that she would never get well. On her deathbed she held Kelsey's hand and pleaded with him to take care of the baby.

"I'll take care of him, Janice," Kelsey told her. "I'll treat him like a son of my own. I swear it."

A SADDLE-SORE grew over Ike Kelsey's heart, when he lost Janice Alton. But like a man robbed of one beautiful thing, and then given another, Kelsey gave all his love and devotion to the baby boy. The child filled an empty void in Kelsey's lonely life. He laughed when the child laughed, he romped and played as he himself was again a small boy.

He gave the boy his name and called him Steve. He told Steve that he—Ike Kelsey—was his father, and that his mother was dead. But the past didn't seem to matter much to young Steve.

"You'll be a great man some day," Kelsey said proudly.

Steve, age nine, said, "Ah, hell, I want to ride wild horses and shoot Indians."

"You oughtn't cuss like that, Steve."

"You do!" retorted Steve.

Ike Kelsey winced. "I reckon I do, Steve. But I want you to be a better man than I. You'll understand some day, son."

Steve was sixteen when Ike Kelsey took him and moved to the Guadalupes in New Mexico. Steve was a strapping kid —the image of his real father. The same blood was in him. Black-haired, dark-eyed, young Steve walked with a swagger, grinned, cussed and rode any wild bronc he could dab a rope on. There was something likable about this boasting, wild-eyed kid with the infectious smile.

Ike Kelsey settled in Bear Valley, just over the peaks from Jim Mulvaney's place, and just four miles from Pinos Altos, the little cowtown. Only Jim Mulvaney was ever to know that Steve was not actually Ike Kelsey's flesh and blood. Mulvaney was not the kind to talk. He had a fifteen year old daughter of his own and he fairly worshipped her.

Mary Mulvaney had honey-colored hair, laughing blue eyes and a mind of her own. Steve made fun of her pigtails, hung by his knees from a cottonwood limb to impress her. Once when a mongrel bit her, Steve killed the dog with a club.

Mary Mulvaney stood sobbing, terrified by Steve's quick-tempered display of brutality. "You shouldn't have killed him, Steve!" she cried accusingly. "He didn't mean to bite me."

Steve's sweaty face was dark and taut. He was trembling from the fires of his inner rage. "He hurt you, Mary. I ain't going to never let nothing or nobody hurt you. You belong to me."

At the time Mary Mulvaney didn't understand. Nor was everything quite clear in Steve's mind. All he knew was that something seemed to snap inside him when something like this happened, and he wanted to see blood.

"You shouldn't have done it, Steve," Ike Kelsey admonished quietly, when he heard of the incident.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Steve said darkly. "I'm a man now. I'll do as I damned please!"

Kelsey looked away, trying to hide his hurt. "You're a good boy, Steve. Just wild, like an untamed yearling. You must learn to control your temper. I want you to be a good man."

"Like who?" the kid snapped.

"Why, like Jim Mulvaney, or a lot of men I know."

Steve grinned, and the hurt went out of Kelsey. "You're good enough for me, Pop. If I can grow up to be as good a man as you I'll be satisfied."

When Jim Mulvaney and a committee from Pinos Altos called on Ike Kelsey and told him they wanted him to run for sheriff of the county, Kelsey smiled and said:

"Boys, there are other men better qualified for the job than me. I appreciate you putting that kind of faith in me, but—"

"You're the one for the job, Ike," Jim Mulvaney said firmly. "Trouble is beginning to come to Lincoln County. Rustling is going on and gunmen are drifting in. Take the job, Ike."

KELSEY finally agreed, proud of the friendship of these men, happy that they should place such confidence in him.

He wore the faded brown suit the night he was elected. He saw young Steve's eyes glow with pride when they swore him into office.

With his right hand uplifted, Ike Kelsey said, his voice tremulous with emotion, "I, Ike Kelsey, do solemnly pledge to maintain the law and order, as prescribed by the statutes of the County of Lincoln, in New Mexico, to the best of my ability. And in the office of sheriff of said County, do hereby pledge to do my duty at all times, with bias toward none." . . .

At seventeen, young Steve had a six-shooter of his own, a rebellious attitude toward life, and the boastful knowledge that his old man was sheriff of a tough county. One night in the Elkhorn Saloon he put in his first appearance. He swaggered up to the bar, ignoring the grins of the other patrons.

"I'll take a shot," he said staunchly.

"Whiskey?" asked the barkeep, grinning.

"That's what a shot is, ain't it?" the kid snapped.

"I'll give you one, Steve," the barkeep replied, "four years from today, when you're twenty-one. Now git!"

No one knew exactly how it happened. But Steve's six-shooter was suddenly in his white-knuckled fist, leveled at the gaping barkeep.

The youth's thin face was purple with rage, his eyes feverish with a glow not good to see.

"You heard me, Fatty!" he gritted. "Set out the drink or I'll shoot. I'm not fooling, mister. My old man's sheriff in these parts and I'm not one to be crossed."

Steve got his drink and almost choked downing it. He swaggered out of the place, having won his first showdown. But when news of what had happened spread it hurt Ike Kelsey's standing more than it did the kid's.

"You'd best take the boy in hand, Ike," Jim Mulvaney warned. "I'm telling you as a friend."

Cut to the quick, Kelsey said, "I'll do something about it, Jim."

Ike Kelsey tried reasoning with Steve that night. And got no place. He threatened to tan the kid's hide, but Steve just grinned at him. Before the session was over Steve had Kelsey eating out of his freckled hand. Steve had a way of winning over people to his side when he wanted to.

It was only a few nights later when Jim Mulvaney paid Kelsey a visit. Mulvaney was beginning to show his age, particularly since his wife had died. He had always been an outspoken man who minced no words.

"Ike," he said, "Mary is in love with Steve. I'm hoping Steve will settle down and live up to all she expects of him."

"He will, Jim," Kelsey said, pleased. "Steve's a good boy at heart. He's done sowed his wild oats."

"I hope so, Ike."

"It'll be nice, Jim—our two kids being married."

"Only one thing I want, Ike. My house is bigger'n yours. Mary's determined that when she's married she's going to live in California. If that's where the kids go to make their stake, I'll want you to come live with me. It'll be mighty lonesome without the kids around. It'll kind of seem like old times, us living together again. Will you come, Ike?"

"I'll come, Jim," Kelsey promised.

THE moon was bright in the Guadalupes that fateful spring night when young Steve rode into Pinos Altos. The smell of the blossoming yucca, growing in the flats, filled the air, mingling with the sweet scent of the mountain cedars.

Steve stopped off at the Elkhorn Saloon, and after two drinks, he said: "You're not married, are you, Fatty?"

Fatty, the barkeep, smirked, "Reckon I got more sense than that, Steve."

Steve drank in silence, then said, "I wouldn't say that, Fatty. I'm planning on getting hitched."

"That's your hard luck, Steve."

The youth scowled, "Careful how you talk, Fatty," he warned.

He was in an ugly mood when he rode out to Mulvaney's Circle-M spread that night. Mary met him on the front gallery as he drew up and slid to the ground. She met him in the block of lamplight that streamed through the front window, and she smelled the whiskey on his breath.

"Mary," Steve said bluntly, "we've been friends ever since the old man and I came to these parts, ain't we?"

"Yes, Steve," she said.

"Well, I want you to marry me tonight,

Mary. No need of putting things off. I'm kinda sick of the way people act around here. I got a little money saved. We can leave these parts."

She drew back from his brusque approach. There was a tinge of fear in her eyes when he clutched her arms. She didn't know that her father had come up from the shed and was in the shadows of the house, watching.

"Let go, Steve," she cried softly. "You're hurting my arm."

"Why don't you say something else, Mary?" he demanded.

She had a grip on her fears then. "Steve, listen to me. We can always be friends. But we can't be anything more."

"What do you mean, Mary?" he grated.

"You're hurting my arm, Steve."

When he released her she was struggling to hold back the tears. "I like you, Steve. I've always liked you," she said tremulously. "But I can't marry you. I'm in love, Steve—with another man."

She talked fast then, trying to explain. She didn't want to hurt Steve, whom she had grown up with. For weeks she had held off telling Steve that she had met Charlie Pike, the young, up-and-coming lawyer in Pinos Altos, who had won her heart. She was sobbing when she finished her story.

"Don't you understand, Steve? Don't you see?"

He looked away, his face white as alkali. And that wild, uncontrollable gleam in his eyes, of frustration and anguish. He said nothing as he strode to his horse and mounted, but the damage had been done and he was deaf to Mary Mulvaney's frantic cries.

He brought blood to his horse's flanks as he spurred toward town that night. Half a hundred people heard the fitful beat of his horse's hoofs as he galloped along the main street toward the center of town.

Store-keepers and loafers were along the walk as he wheeled his lathered horse up in front of Charlie Pike's modest office, next to the barber shop.

"Charlie!" Steve shouted, lighting down. "Charlie Pike!"

The young lawyer came to the doorway, a tall, level-eyed young man with a gentle voice and gold-rimmed spectacles. "Why, hello. Steve." he said. "Come on in."

"It's either you or me, Charlie!" Steve grated. "Grab for your gun."

HIS voice carried the full length of the street. Charlie Pike's smile fell from his lips. "What's the matter, Steve?"

"Draw!"

"I've got no quarrel with you, Steve."

"Draw!"

From the barber-shop doorway a man said huskily, "Steve, get hold of yourself!"

Steve snarled, "For the last time, Charlie, I'm giving you a chance to go for your gun! Draw or I'll shoot you down in cold blood!"

Charlie Pike must have known that he was going to die. He had never carried a gun, but he'd always kept an old long-barrelled six-shooter on the top of his desk near the door. In that moment of desperation he made a grab for it, shouting his final plea: "Don't do it, Steve! Don't—"

The roar of Steve's six-shooter drowned out his words. Bullets jarred into Charlie Pike's lank body. He groped his way out onto the walk, sinking lower and lower as forty-five slugs smashed into his chest. He was dead before he sprawled in the dust. Before anybody had time to do anything, Steve was spurring his horse out of town at a dead run.

It was old Ike Kelsey and a tight-lipped posse that came upon Steve, a week later, hiding out in a cave back in the hills. Kelsey looked like a dead man when he said:

"You'll have to come with me, Steve."

The fight was all out of Steve. Hungry and frightened, he rode into town as a prisoner. Behind bars, he pleaded with Kelsey to help him. He tried to explain that he'd been insanely mad when he'd killed Charlie Pike.

"I didn't know what I was doing, Pop," Steve pleaded.

Old Ike Kelsey went around town like a man in a daze until the day of the trial. He brought in a lawyer from San Antonio to defend Steve. But the lawyer, a mealy-mouthed, nervous man was a poor stick to lean on. It looked bad for Steve until Kelsey had his say to the jury. He wasn't mealy-mouthed and he wasn't nervous. In his own blunt, tragic way he said:

"Boys, my speech will be short. Steve was in the wrong. In a moment of insane rage he killed a man. His own mind will

make him suffer for it without any man's help. He's all I've got. For my sake I'm asking you to let him off easy."

You could have heard a pin drop in the courtroom that spring day. The jury tromped out, and they weren't gone long. They all thought a lot of Ike Kelsey. When they came back with their verdict the judge cleared his throat as if it hurt. He was a tobacco-chewing oldster who owned a ranch adjoining Kelsey's place.

"Because of your father," he said sternly, "the jury has recommended leniency, Steve Kelsey. In view of their recommendation I hereby sentence you to ten years in prison."

Relief swept through old Ike Kelsey, mingling with his sorrow. For he had felt, as had most all folks, that Steve's sentence would be life. Everybody knew it was because of Kelsey alone that Steve got off so easy.

Ike Kelsey was with Steve just before the law took him by stagecoach to Santa Fe. Kelsey turned that chore over to some deputies from Lincoln. It was pathetic the way old Ike Kelsey kept looking at Steve, then looking away, trying his best to swallow the lump in his throat. No man could have loved his own blood son more. It seemed to Kelsey as if all his dreams and hopes had come crashing to earth. He remembered a promise he had made, years ago.

I'll take care of him, Janice. I'll treat him like a son of my own. I swear it.

To Steve he said, "It's only ten years, son. That won't be long, and you'll still be young when you come out. I'll be here waiting for you, ready to help you start life anew."

IN THOSE harsh, lonely months that followed, old Ike Kelsey lived more and more within himself, avoiding old friends. For hours at a time he and his aging Mexican helper would sit on the front gallery, staring at the purple peaks. It was common gossip that Kelsey's prestige as a lawman was fast slipping.

When word reached Kelsey that Mary Mulvaney had married a beef-buyer and moved to California, he knew that Jim Mulvaney was sharing his loneliness. Jim Mulvaney, like Kelsey, had lived too long in the Guadalupes to ever move. The timber and the peaks, the warmth of the summer sun, and the cold of the winter snows, were part of them. This wild, rugged land was theirs.

When Jim Mulvaney rode up to Kelsey's ranch house that evening it was plain that the years had begun to lay heavy upon the big man. His broad shoulders were slightly stooped. He was bald except for a fringe of reddish hair around his ears. His eyes seemed tired from looking for something that wasn't there.

"Mary's gone now, Ike," he said slowly. "That big house of mine over the hill yonder is mighty lonesome. I wish you'd bring Garcia and come live with me."

It hurt Kelsey immeasurably to say what he did. "I'd like to, Jim. But it's out of the question. It wouldn't be like the old days, for there'd always be thoughts of Steve standing between us."

Jim Mulvaney stared at his former partner a long time, and he understood. "I guess you're right, Ike," he said, and rode away.

Kelsey and Jim Mulvaney seemed to drift apart after that. Kelsey devoted himself to the duties of his office as sheriff. When an outlying rancher reported some of his stock stolen, Kelsey went out after the rustler alone. He was gone for three days and nights. When he returned to Pinos Altos he was haggard and half sick. There was an ugly bullet gash along his ribs; but his eyes glinted with the determined expression of a man who has vowed to uphold the law, and no power on earth could deter him.

The rustler had been shot through the heart. His limp body was thonged across the saddle. To the group of townspeople who met him on his return that day, Kelsey said, "I tried to fetch him in alive, but he wouldn't have it that way."

Folks knew then that a tougher, better lawman never lived than old Ike Kelsey. He was no swaggering bounty hunter. Rather, he was a quiet, haunted-eyed old gent who had a distasteful job to do.

When, at the end of five years, the waiting became intolerable for Ike Kelsey, he went to Santa Fe and paid the territorial governor, General Lew Wallace, a visit. There was no wheedling or begging on Kelsey's part, for he wasn't a man to do that. He simply put in his bid for Steve's parole.

Tall, stately General Wallace had heard

of Ike Kelsey's fine record. He instantly liked this level-eyed, gnarled old lawman.

"I shall see what can be done, Sheriff Kelsey," he said gently.

Weeks later, when the letter came to Kelsey in Pinos Altos telling of Steve's parole, the old lawman's heart beat a little faster. He confided the news to no one but Garcia. He tried to picture Steve as a man now, eager and ready to live down his rotten past.

THE night Steve arrived home, Kelsey met him at the front door. Garcia was in the kitchen, busy baking a cake, for a celebration had been planned. Steve took Kelsey's hand in his own, but there was no warmth in Steve's grip. He was no longer a kid, but a full grown man. His face was lined and in his dark eyes was a restlessness, a bitterness not good to see. He smiled with his lips, a crooked, twisted grin that hinted of a sneer.

"Hello, Ike," he said flatly.

Old Ike Kelsey tried to hide the hurt inside him, the disappointment. He said, "Welcome home, Steve," and his voice shook.

Garcia came into the room, but the joy of the homecoming wasn't there. The Mexican forgot the food he had prepared. They sat down and tried to talk, but they all felt the strain, and each word they spoke was forced. Kelsey thought. Time and prison life have changed Steve. He'll never be the same again.

But he tried to be cheerful. He said, "I've bought a few more cattle, Steve. I figger we stand to make some money ranching if we work at it."

"That's making money the hard way, Ike," Steve said, smiling queerly.

The chaos between them could not be bridged by words. Ike Kelsey realized it more fully as days drifted into weeks. Steve loafed around the ranch doing little odd jobs, but his interest wasn't in cows. He made no effort to look up old friends, instead he avoided them. The day Jim Mulvaney heard of Steve's return he rode over to Kelsey's place. He tried to hide any resentment he might have felt toward Steve. He tried to be friendly enough. But Steve was sullen, and the meeting did not go well.

Fatty, the barkeep, and another old friend came out to see Steve one day and told him they were glad he was back. Steve didn't say half a dozen words. The two men rode away and never came back again.

Very gently, Ike Kelsey admonished Steve about his snarling, defiant attitude. He tried to point out to Steve that these mountain people were ready to take him back as a friend, and let the past be forgotten.

Steve's face darkened, and the deep, bitter lines were about his mouth. "They don't give a damn about me!" he snapped. "They want to see what I look like after being in prison, that's all. Then go back among themselves and gossip. To hell with them!"

Old Ike Kelsey shook his head sadly. "You're wrong, Steve. Why don't you try to see things as they are before it's too late!"

"Stop preaching, Ike!" Steve retorted hotly. "I'll lead my own life!"

That night, for the first time since coming home, Steve dressed up, hooked on his old six-shooter and rode into Pinos Altos. He was a little tipsy when Ike Kelsey heard him stumble into his bedroom sometime near dawn.

After that, Steve went out often, but he never talked about his trips. Kelsey divided his time between his sheriff's duties and the ranch. In town one day he asked Fatty, the barkeep, if Steve was patronizing his saloon—if Steve had been causing him any trouble.

"Why, Steve don't come in my place, Ike," Fatty said.

As weeks passed into months, and the winter snows gave way to a lush early spring, Kelsey worked from daylight till dark trying to brand the few cattle he had. He did not realize he was neglecting his law duties, or that a rustling plague was growing in the Pinos Altos country—not till the day a group of stern-faced ranchers called on him at his office.

Pete Jones was one of the committee. Jones, a highly respectable man in the community, had been the jury foreman at Steve's trial. He and Ike Kelsey had become close friends over the years. He was a big man, slow to rile, but embued with a stern sense of justice.

"You're the sheriff, Ike," he said grimly. "Now that rustlers are stealing us blind, we expect you to do your duty. You'll

have to let your ranching go by the board for the time being. We want this rustling stopped, Ike."

"I'll do everything humanly possible to stop it, boys," Kelsey told the committee.

KELSEY, gun-heeled and grim, rode out that day into the hills to cut the rustlers' sign. He found tracks of stolen cattle—heading south. But in the malpais the sign petered out. He kept up his search for a week, riding, watching, but got nowhere.

Then Jim Mulvaney dropped into his office to see him.

"The rustlers have started in on my cows, Ike," Mulvaney said. "We've got to do something."

Kelsey's nerves were frayed, his temper short. "Damn it, Jim!" he said. "I'm doing all I can to stop it."

"Have you figgered the rustler might be a local man?"

Cold, clammy fingers suddenly clutched at Kelsey's heart. "What do you mean, Jim?" he asked.

In his own way Big Jim Mulvaney said, "I hate to tell you this, Ike—"

"Out with it, Jim."

"Some of the boys figger Steve's got a hand in it."

It was what Kelsey feared. He went cold all over, staring down at his gnarled hands. Something inside him seemed to shrivel and die, and in the dead silence his voice was a ghostly whisper.

"You know how I feel about the law, Jim. I'll do my duty, then resign. Tell the boys that for me, won't you?"

"I'll tell them, Ike," Mulvaney said.

Steve showed up at the ranch house that night, the first time in a week. His dark eyes, feverish in his gaunt, unshaven face, glowed queerly. His hands shook a little as he wolfed some food in the kitchen.

Kelsey watched Steve a long time before he spoke. "Steve," he said, "some folks think you're behind all the rustling that's been going on. But I don't believe it. I don't believe you'd go that low."

Steve's once-handsome face darkened with anger. In a grating voice he said, "I've already told you how I feel about the damn people around here, Ike. They've got it in for me, and nothing could ever change them. Parole or no parole, I'm pulling out tonight. And don't try to stop me, Ike. It'll be too bad if you do. . . ."

He wasn't the same youth that Kelsey had known as he backed out the door that night, fingering the butt of his six-shooter. He was a man gone bad, and nothing could change him.

Kelsey made no move as he heard Steve spur madly out of the ranch yard. He stood like a man doomed to the gallows, robbed of everything that was worthwhile in life.

"It's the end, Garcia," he said tragically.

Later that night, when Jim Mulvaney and Pete Jones rode up and came into the house, Ike Kelsey could feel the growing unfriendliness of these men.

Pete Bostwick said sharply, "They got away with some more of my cattle at dusk, Ike. They're shoving them across the malpais, across the tip of Texas into Mexico. One man is the brains of the outfit. Once we get him the ring is broken up. I want you to know that us ranchers are fed up with your willy nilly ways, Ike. I'm telling you straight from the shoulder. Tonight we're setting a trap. We're taking the law into our own hands."

Ike Kelsey smiled like a corpse. "What you really want to tell me is that Steve is that one man with the brains. And that I'm covering up for him. Isn't that right, Pete."

"That's just about it," Jones said coldly.

Without another word, he and Jim Mulvaney went out to their horses and rode away.

IKE KELSEY did not sleep that night, for some psychic message of death kept entering his consciousness. Shortly after dawn he was not surprised when Jim Mulvaney and a group of ranchers rode up into the yard. It was Mulvaney who spoke, and his voice told of the fierce rage inside him.

"Pete Jones was killed, Ike—just at daybreak. We set our trap and had the rustlers surrounded in Kilburn's Hole. They made a run for it, shooting two of my Circle-M men. But we got three of them. Jones was working alone. When we come upon his body we found where he was walking up to the man who killed him. He was probably talking to the rustler at the time. Jones' six-shooter was still in his holster. You going to join

our posse and look for the killer or stay here, Ike?"

It was a long time before Ike Kelsey spoke. "I'll look for him, Jim. My guess is he's still hiding out in the hills. Only one thing I ask—"

"Name it, Ike."

"I'd rather go alone, if you don't mind. There's some jobs a feller would rather do alone."

When Mulvaney and the other men had ridden away, Ike Kelsey went to the shed and rigged his horse. Beneath the tan his deep-lined face was the color of cold ashes. He was just mounting as Garcia came up.

"I think I know where the murderer of Pete Jones would hide, Garcia," he said queerly. "You can look for me back sometime around dark."

* * * * *

IKE KELSEY leaned back tiredly in his rocker, conscious of his weakness and the pain of his shoulder wound. On the table beside him the lamp made a low sputtering sound, its yellow rays slanting through the open door into the warm night outside. A gentle breeze sprang up, rich with the smell of the pine trees and balsams, fragrant with the scent of dew on the meadow grass.

In the kitchen doorway stood Garcia, gloomed by a spell he could not explain. "I think I hear horses, Senor Ike," he murmured.

Ike Kelsey remained silent, seeing with eyes that saw not, listening with ears that heard not.

"It will be Steve, eh, Senor Ike?" the Mexican asked.

"Yes, Garcia. It will be Steve."

With much effort, Ike Kelsey got to his feet. He walked out onto the front gallery and Garcia followed him. They stood there in the shaft of lamplight, watching as several riders merged out of the darkness. The rider in the lead was Jim Mulvaney, a great figure who, in the faint lamplight, looked very old, very tired.

Back of him were four ranchers riding abreast, a pair in front, a pair behind. Between the four men, suspended by ropes from their kak horns, hung a wooden box. It was a box over six feet long, about two feet deep, wider at the head than the foot, and inside it lay the man who had murdered Pete Jones.

"We fetched the body down out of the hills for you, Ike," Mulvaney said. "It's mighty lonesome over at my place now. Won't you reconsider my offer and come live with me now?"

Kelsey felt the warmth and sincerity of Jim Mulvaney's offer. He knew that he and Mulvaney would be partners the rest of their days. Tomorrow would be a new day for them both. The meadow grass would sparkle in the bright morning sunlight, and they'd go about their business of living.

"Yes, Jim, I'll come."

He walked tiredly up to the crude coffin between the horses. He lifted one hand and touched the box, like a benediction.

"Welcome home, Steve," Ike Kelsey said.

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Johnny Koonts takes one pasear into dark trails!

Johnny set his foot against the face in the darkness and kicked out

HOT FOOT

JOHNNY KOONTS rode the dapple-gray through the wide doorway of the livery stable, stepped down, dropped the reins, and nodded to the roustabout who came out of the office.

"A little nourishment for a horse, if yuh don't mind," said Johnny.

"Corn on the cob, one hay, comin' up," said the youth, kind of smart-aleck.

Johnny watched the youth's smoky eyes as they gave the gray and his Briar brand a quick, wise once-over.

He'd been watching like that three days now, wherever he stopped, to see if anybody recognized the horse. He had told himself forty times, "This horse will be a dead give-away, to anybody as knows him, as long as I keep him." This time he felt particularly uneasy, for this smart-aleck was a wise ginney, looked like.

"When yuh want him back, traveler?"

"Morning," said Johnny.

"Two feeds. You can redeem him for four bits." He looked Johnny up and

down, and somehow it made Johnny squirm inside. "Where yuh takin' yore nourishment, stranger?"

"Why?" asked Johnny. "Is there a law?"

"Several laws 'round town—Pinks, if yuh're interested."

Johnny wanted to ask if the Pinkertons could be looking for a stolen horse, but he didn't dare to appear nosy or even concerned.

"Good. Maybe my horse'll be here when I come for him," he passed it off.

"You're fast," said the hostler. "Looky, you want good eats?"

"The best," said Johnny, though he didn't have a dime to his pockets.

"Looky." The fellow pulled Johnny by the arm and pointed through the door. "See that caffy, over acrost and up a few doors?"

"You mean the place with that newfangled name, C-a-f-e, on the window?"

"That's it, Sam's place, ulter modern, plumb up-to-date. Tell him I sent yuh and yuh'll git big eggs. Tell him I sent yuh and he'll give yuh a job if yuh want it."

"Tell him Caffy sent me?"

"Caffy? Yuh're fly, cully. Tell him Pouch sent yuh."

Pouch winked, deliberately and significantly, squirted a mouthful of bugjuice, and awaited Johnny's move.

Johnny's move was out. Thumping along the board sidewalk through the near dusk, he asked himself plaintively why that livery stable character had taken him on with such familiarity. Because he was obviously a rat, and Johnny didn't like rats. Their bite was likely poison.

"Reckon I can't be too doggone uppish though," the outer Johnny communed with the inner Johnny. "Horse thief. But I'd like to know what he seen in me to make him think I was a cousin."

WHEN Johnny left the barn he'd no least intention of going to the cafe. Not without even a nickel in his pocket for a ham sandwich. But when he took a step up to the restaurant porch he flashed a glance back to the barn, and there was Pouch watching. So Johnny opened the door and went into the hot, foody room. A man with a floursack apron and a paper cap was behind the short counter.

"Yessir, comin' up, what'll it be?" he asked in the same smart-aleck way Pouch had.

Johnny's first thought was to order a meager meal and leave his pocketknife as pay. But the fellow had a thin crooked nose, and a siwaddlin' chin, and eyes that somehow didn't quite track but that cut you in two, so Johnny changed his mind and remembered that honesty is distinctly the best policy.

"Mister," he said, "I'm fresh out of two-bits, or a dime, or even a nick. But Pouch said to recommend him and you could stake me to a job."

Sam, if he was Sam, regarded Johnny for a full minute, and a change came over his twisty face.

"You hot foot?" he asked, his lips hardly moving.

Johnny considered the term and said, "Yes," very softly.

"A gun?"

"No."

"A horse?"

"Yes. And a saddle and a bridle and a saddle-blanket," Johnny said in a rush.

The man pivoted into the little cubbyhole of a kitchen, loaded a bowl with stew and set it before Johnny. It was good stew and, with coffee and crusty bread, the best meal Johnny had eaten in days.

"If I'd had this three nights ago," the inner Johnny told the outer Johnny, "I wouldn't of—"

He didn't finish the thought. He didn't like the word. It was an ugly word—stole. Wouldn't have stolen the horse. But it had been a rainy night, and he hadn't eaten all day, and he was chilled to the bone. He hadn't tried to mooch supper. He wasn't a moocher.

The dapple-gray was standing out of the blowing rain beside a store. It was just good dark. He had been told earlier that he probably could get a riding job on a little ranch three-four miles west out of town. So he had simply forked the horse and hit out for the job, and supper, and a bed.

He missed the ranch, if there was a ranch, and just kept on going. He had to find some place to stay the night or freeze to death. There was a place at the next town. Only it wasn't a town. There was nothing but a little yellow depot, and a house and a store and a blacksmith shop. Wrapped in the saddle-blanket and a

slicker that had been behind the saddle, he shivered under a shed. Johnny swapped the slicker for two dollars and a breakfast of cheese and crackers and water in the store, and just kept on riding into the west, scared muscle-stiff every time he met anybody for fear they would look too hard at the horse and recognize the Briar brand on the gray. To keep this from being too evident he smeared mud over the brand, kind of natural looking, as if Dapple had, say, rubbed against a muddy gatepost.

Johnny sopped the last smidgen of stew with the last atom of bread, swallowed the last drop of coffee.

"Ready for the job?" Sam asked.

"What kind of job?" Johnny said, a nagging little suspicion in him, for hadn't Pouch mentioned that Pinkertons were in town?

"Ho," said Sam. "Choosy, uh?" He thumbed. "Go through that door."

With Sam right on his heels, Johnny went through the door. Two men were in the room, that for size just matched the kitchen. The men sat on kitchen chairs at a table with a green cloth top where poker was probably played when poker was on the menu. Johnny walked on a carpet of matches and cigarette butts, old chewed cigar stumps, and whatnot. The air in the room was musty. The two men regarded Johnny with looks that half indicated a-knife-in-the-ribs and instant flight.

"Tote, Frank, this is a hot foot Pouch sent over. Needs a job to pay for his supper and breakfast."

The men said nothing, just kept their eyes on Johnny.

"Only," Sam went on, "I like for my em-employees to have a neat appearance. You sure need a shave, uh— What'd yuh say yore name was, son?"

"Hot Feet," said Johnny, and laughed, wondering if he could get by with a phony.

"Ooliedoo, Hot. There's a basin and mirror glass. I'll hand yuh in the shavin's. Better skin down and wash yoreself too, so yore feet won't fume and hayseed ain't prominent in yore hair."

Johnny peeled his shirt for a starter, and Sam came back with a razor and soap and a towel. Johnny appreciated the shave; his face had begun to itch. And he did not, like some people, mind a bath. But he enjoyed them most in more or less privacy.

By the time he'd got his face scraped he knew why they wanted him to wash all over. The way Tote and Frank had hawk-eyed at his clothes when he'd taken off his coat and shirt had been too obvious. They wanted to see if he might have a Pinkerton shield or badge or a hidden little gun, or anything to give him away.

So Johnny not only stripped, he turned his pants wrong side out and hand-beat them in a pretense of ridding them of hayseed. And he tossed his boots to the men with:

"Wish you'd feel me a tack in one of 'em that may grow up and make me limp-walk in two-three days."

YEH, he sure had to convince them he wasn't any Pink. They explored his boots, turned his pants right side out, and felt in the pockets incidentally, and managed to explore thoroughly the rest of his clothing. Johnny enjoyed the bath and all, except for the trash under his tender bare feet. When he was dressed again, one of the men opened the door.

"Sam."

Sam entered, got the nod from both men, and gave Johnny a cigar of the kind known as "twofers." He even held a match with what he aimed to be a smile.

"Well, Hot, yore little chore is as simple as fallin' off a chair. Yuh ride out this street west to the edge of town, and go about one quarter of a mile further to a clutter of ranch buildings with three windmills. Yuh can't miss it. Then yuh go on past a hunnerd yards and let yoreself through a gate, and yuh meander back towards the buildings."

"And get shot?" asked Johnny.

"No, no, nothing like that. Most respectable ranch in the county. Only the feller you'll meet between the gate and the pens, he's promised not to leave the ranch for six months, account he gits stewed ever' time he comes to town. He'll give yuh a package o' laundry. That's all."

"Laundry?" said Johnny. "Am I supposed to wash it?"

"Now. You ain't that dumb. You're to ride back into town with it, and 'fore yuh get far in Tote and Frank'll meet yuh and take it. And'll hand yuh a ten-dollar wil-

liam for yore trouble. Now, git yore horse and ride, Hot Foot."

Johnny looked at the three men. All he saw was eyes. Eyes with no more mercy than wolf eyes. Eyes with kill in them if his feet got the least bit tangled. Desperate eyes, desperate men, dogged by the Pinks, for some reason Johnny couldn't guess.

"If I'm caught—" said Johnny.

"Yuh won't be, you do exactly as yuh're telled."

Johnny still hesitated, and Sam spoke three words: "Hot Foot—horse."

Yeh, they had him looped. What a feller got for stealing a horse!

"And the sawbuck for your trouble," Sam added. "The minute the laundry is in Frank's fist yuh git the tenner. Yuh can ride then to suit yore taste, and the further the better."

JOHNNY took a deep breath, nodded and started out. He heard Tote and Frank ease out through the back door.

Johnny stopped on the porch in front of "Cafe" to locate himself. It was past a small town's supper hour. Citizens were coming back uptown for— Why, it was Saturday night, Johnny remembered. Two men passed in front of him, and Johnny caught the words, ". . . bank robbery . . ."

"But the Pinks will nab 'em, sooner or later," the other man said confidently.

Laundry! thought Johnny. He slanted a glance across to the livery stable. Pouch was standing in the doorway under a lantern, looking toward the restaurant. Johnny moved out. He remembered that, as he had ridden into town at a bit after sundown, he had passed, back east along this main street, a nice estate with a black iron fence and an open gate. At the gate a small neat sign said, "This is my home, I do banking at the bank. Burr Landam." Johnny had grinned at this sign, the man's crusty nature. Now he wondered if it was Burr Landam's bank that had been touched.

Johnny dodged a couple of women, and heard one say indignantly, "I lost a hundred and four dollars in the robbery, more than I can afford." And the other said, "Well, if you ask me, fourteen thousand is more than the bank can afford, too."

Pouch had the dapple-gray saddled and ready. "Don't git fly, kid," he warned darkly.

A big question had been hatching in Johnny's mind. "Listen, Pouch, how'd you get on to me?"

The sly, wise, cute expression lit like a little bird on Pouch's face that had a cheek swollen with a tobacco cud.

"Way yuh watched me to see if I reckernized that brand. I don't miss nothin', Hot Foot."

"Maybe you're a Pink yore own self, Bugjuice."

"Yuh'll wish I was, anything goes wrong with yuh, see?"

Johnny stepped to the saddle and jogged through the wide door and into the street.

He wanted to ride fast and hard and vanish out of this mess he'd got roped into, but where would he ride, broke? Get that ten-dollar william into his claws, he'd be a free man—half free, that is. And he'd ride all night, ride west and far.

A half dozen business and residential blocks put him out of town, except for a few scattered houses. Then he was past them and in the country. Pretty soon he made out the shadowy mass of buildings, which would be the most respectable ranch in the country. He knew for sure they were the place Sam had described when he made out three windmills pretty close together turning against the dark sky in the night wind. A cozy looking ranch.

Lonesomeness smote him. He wished he had a steady job at such a place. And friends. Well, if he didn't, it was his own fault. He had worked at such places. Worked briefly, then quit, to ride on. Itchy feet. Hot feet now, because he rode a horse that wasn't his. Well, if he ever got another job at a good place he'd stay. Only he'd likely never get another good job. Just drift from poor to poorer. He felt lonelier than he had ever felt before.

Past the windmills—wheels in the sky, as he thought of them—he found the gate Sam had mentioned. He was about to jackknife down when the gate opened and a man's voice asked:

"Who're you?"

"Hot Foot."

"Who sent yuh?"

"Sam."

"The town quiet?"

"Saturday night crowd." Then, because the voice was harsh with uneasiness Johnny went devilish and added: "Half of 'em look like Pinks."

"Yuh don't say! What'd Sam send yuh for?" Which sounded like a password question.

"The laundry."

"Huh?"

"Sent me to get the stuff."

"Here it is. Take it. It ain't been touched. Me, I'm riding far and fast—though all I done was to be lookout, which'n they roped me in on."

A WHITE canvas poke about as big as a striped watermelon, came heaving up into Johnny's hand.

"Tell Sam I ain't took a dime."

"Listen," said Johnny, going curious, "how come they put this in the hands of such an honest feller as you?"

"It got hot on 'em, in town. Too much reward. Too many Pinks."

"Is it going to be any cooler now?" Johnny asked.

"They're fixin' to divide it and scat. Me, I'm scattin' without no dividin'. Mister, you can have my share, or yuh can give it back to the bank. It don't make no difference to me. Good night."

"Happy riding," said Johnny.

"Same to you, cully."

Johnny wondered just how happy his riding would be, on a stolen horse. It got to be right unhappy by the time he neared the town, with his thinking about the lady who'd said she couldn't afford to lose her hundred and four dollars, and about the flat-eyed men, Tote and Frank, in the back room, and their going through his clothes like they had a right to.

Suddenly Johnny was pretty sore about that. Men assuming they had a right to shove other people around. Take their hard-earned money. Then Johnny laughed, nastily, at himself. Wasn't he riding somebody else's horse and saddle? A bitter devilishness set up in him, and he laughed out.

"That you, Hot Foot?" a voice came from the shadows.

"Sam?"

"Frank. Sam and Tote are heah. You got the laundry?"

"Sure."

"Hand it down," the voice ordered, and a figure appeared beside the gray.

More bossiness. Johnny laughed softly. He took his right foot out of the stirrup and set it against the face in the darkness and kicked out. The man reeled backward and thudded to the ground. Then Johnny jumped the dapple-gray into a dead run.

Two shots snarled close. The third one was farther off. And so was Johnny. He could hear horses pounding after him. Then he was getting into the town, into the crowded business section. People must have heard the shots and the thudding horses, for they were running into the street and yelling excitedly.

Johnny didn't want to run over anybody. And more devilishness took hold of him. He just opened his mouth and yells came out.

"Help! Thieves! Bank Robbers!"

That ought to get the three men behind into a mess with the crowd. If the crowd didn't stop Johnny. But they were giving back toward the sidewalks. Johnny thundered through them, still yelling robbers and cutthroats. Then he was past, but three or four men were running for horses at the hitchracks.

Johnny got another idea, and began to wonder how far along this street it was that he had seen the banker's house behind the black iron fence. He'd missed the ten-dollar william Sam had promised, and he needed traveling money. A terrific hullabaloo was being raised back there. Three or four more shots sounded, and the yelling could have been heard clear back to the Briar brand ranch that was the dapple-gray's home.

A deeper darkness appeared along the street. Johnny guessed it must be the black iron fence and slowed down. A spot of white showed up, and that must be the sign with the banker's name on it. Yep. And the gate was still open. The gray trotted through, and Johnny kept him right on to the big house among the trees. He veered broadside to the deep front porch and tossed the "laundry" onto the boards. It landed like a sack of washers.

"Hiya, in there!" Johnny called.

"What do you want?" demanded a voice so close it made the gray jump. "What's all that racket downtown?"

"You the bankeroo, Mister?"

"I'm Banker Burr Landam, if that's what you mean. What's all that rumpus?"

"I brought the loot back. That was it drove a nail in the porch."

"You—loot— Are you one of the robbers?"

"Nope. But I met 'em. They gave me the swag—temporary."

"Who are they? Name them. If you're telling the truth."

"You can see if I'm telling the truth by maybe kicking that poke with yore sore toe."

"Who are you?" Banker Landam demanded.

"Hot Foot from Faraway."

"You'll have to be a witness," the banker said firmly.

"Nope. Just dip in that poke and hand me some reward, so I can be on my way."

The man went up on the porch and squatted at the moneybag. While he fumbled, Johnny listened to the continuing hullabaloo back in the business district. Then Banker Landam struck a match, and grunting satisfaction, came down off the porch.

"How long have you—er—put in, getting this money here?"

"Oh, half hour, maybe, counting everything. The reward will be ample pay."

"Uhhuh. Here"—the banker held up a hand, white in the night—"this will pay for your time."

What Johnny felt in his fingers then were two silver dollars, warm from Mister Banker's pants pocket.

"Hey," protested Johnny, "I owe the livery stable and the cafe dang near this much."

"Were they involved in the robbery? We've suspicioned them." And he said again, "You'll have to be a witness."

"What do you want for two bucks, Mister?"

"Did you expect the entire reward?"

"Why not? There's the swag. So I can pay Pouch and Sam for suppers for two."

"Wait a minute."

The man went up on the porch, and into the house. He shut the door behind him but it evidently didn't catch, for it swung open slowly, and Johnny heard the banker yelling:

"Central! Confound-blast, central, what's the matter? Yeh, give me the sheriff's office—the jail, blast it!"

Johnny eased his horse off the brick walk and trotted toward the gate. So that was the way Banker Landam would return a favor, was it?—getting the law.

At the wide gate Johnny debated a half second and reined to the eastward, away from that hubbub and babel back in town. Somehow it had a sinister and ominous note in it. Then, about half a block away, two or three horsemen suddenly yipped and spurred and came pounding. Johnny jumped his horse into a run. The riders might be Sam and Frank and Tote, or even Pouch!

Back in the yard Banker Landam was yelling his head off. "Thief! Murder! Robber! Catch him! On a horse! Big reward!"

"Two dollars," thought Johnny, and spread the gray to the ground.

IF THE three riders behind weren't the robbers, they might as well be, so far as Johnny's hide was concerned, with the banker telling the world. Three or four shots cracked around Johnny, and a voice was shouting, "Halt! Halt!" It was all becoming more sinister and ominous than ever.

But Johnny had the best horse. Gradually he pulled away from the pursuit. And after a time, when he stopped to listen, the only sound he heard was the drone of the wind in a pair of telephone wires.

"Dap," he said to the horse, "let's go home. The world's too big and rough for a country boy."

So Johnny rode eastward the rest of the night, though he had no home to go to. He laid over most of the next day, and afterward traveled another night and a day and deep into the third night before he reached the selfsame hitchrack from which he had loosened Dap's bridle a week before.

He considered just hitching the dapple-gray at the rack and getting out of the country quick. But he had the appetite of a wolf. He'd spent practically all of the banker's two bucks on horse feed. And here beside the store he could smell, or at least he fancied that he could, the entrancing odors of raw bacon, and dried peaches, and cheese, and plug tobacco. It made him so hungry he felt faint, and he knew he could not stay in town and smell such aromas. So he got back in the saddle

and headed out toward the Briar brand ranch, which place he had seen a week before as he mooched a farm wagon ride into town.

Johnny had meant to turn the gray into a pasture where the ranch lane took off from the highway but the three-o'clock-in-the-morning hour was so still he decided to take Dap on to the pens and sheds. It wasn't far, and nothing interrupted. When he got down to open the corral gate he still didn't hear any sounds of people, so he followed the horse inside to pull the saddle and bridle. As he paused to shut the gate Dap went on to a shed, and Johnny saw it was the saddle shed.

So he pulled the saddle and spraddled it over the pole that held other saddles, and he carefully hung the bridle over the saddle horn, and laid the saddle blanket over the saddle to keep dust off. Then he put his arm around Dap's sweaty neck and sobbed, once. It was tough to part with a good friend like old Dap.

But time pressed. It was growing pale in the east. He must be a long time off from here by sunup. But back at the road he felt so hungry and woozy and weary he sat down on a low bank just long enough to pull off a boot and get a twig or something out.

When he finally came to, the sun was nice and warm on his face. He socked his foot into the boot and took off up the road almost at a trot. He had covered a mile before he realized he was heading back toward the town. Then to make it worse, he saw a rig of some kind coming behind him, raising a little dust. He made up his mind he wouldn't look up or speak. But the driver stopped, and spoke.

"Ever when I see a cowboy walking I say he's out of a job or he just plain won't work. Get in, son."

"Oh no," said Johnny, because on the side of the buckboard was the Briar brand painted, and both horses bore the same brand on their hips. "I don't mind walking."

"Sev'ral miles to town," the man told him.

"I don't aim to go all the way."

"Ummm—maybe yuh're the feller," said the past-middle-age cowman, "that borrowed my dapple-gray cutting horse and brought him back."

Johnny got up into the seat beside the man. "I didn't borrow him," he said. "I stole him."

"What did you bring him back for? Wasn't he an able horse?"

"Best I ever rode. But he wasn't mine," Johnny said sadly.

They jogged along for half a mile, maybe a mile, in silence. Then from the ranchman: "I like the way you do things—put the saddle where it belongs, and hang the bridle careful, and cover it over with the saddle blanket. I'm kind of particular that way. You need a job?"

"Listen, Mister," said Johnny, "I could use two jobs. But when you hear what I've got to tell, yuh won't want me in the same county with you. A horse thief—they used to hang 'em."

"Yuh're just a horse borrower, looks like to me."

SO JOHNNY lit in and told his whole story, making it bad for himself all the way through, he was hating himself so much. He even told about the banker's two dollars.

"Heh-heh," chuckled the man. "Bankers can do the durnedest things. I'm one myself, kinda part time. . . . Well, like you say, yuh're hired, son."

"I never said," Johnny bit off. "You don't want me. Yuh're foolin', somehow."

"Ruther have a seasoned man like you than one that ain't tempered himself up yet, by experience. Whoa. Here's a good eating place." The Briar branded horses stopped. "Hey, George." A fat rolypoly man came to the screen door of the cafe. "George, take this boy and give him his supper and breakfast and dinner."

"Another'n?" said George.

The banker-cowman nudged Johnny out of the seat. "You can have the dapple-gray," he said, "if yuh'll stay a year. All right, John, go eat. I'll be back time yuh're through."

But Johnny didn't rush right in past the fat George. He had to stop and turn his back quick and kind of blink his eyes. John! He'd been called John for the first time he could remember. Must be growing up. And he had a job—

"Hey, whatsa mattah, kid?" George asked, sort of joshing.

"Looks like it's raining," said Johnny—John—and tried to laugh.

(Continued from Page 7)

kinfolk. In less than five days he travelled afoot through 160 miles of forest wilderness. At Boonesborough his triumph was dimmed by learning that his wife, who believed him dead, had left and returned to her Carolina home. But he got to Boonesborough in time to defend it successfully against a nine-day siege of Indians headed by British officers.

During this troubulous period, Daniel saw his brother Squire killed by Indians. Spurred by British commanders, Indian raiders kept Kentucky in an uproar. In the long campaign, Boone became a lieutenant-colonel of militia.

In a report rendered to Benjamin Harrison, then Governor of Virginia, Daniel told of the death of his youngest son, Israel, in an Indian fight.

Defending the Frontier

It was on this "western front" that Daniel Boone did his bit in the Revolution. The Frontier was thinly defended. Hostilities were almost continuous. Boone's experience served the settlers well in this kind of skirmish warfare. But emigration was checked entirely into the "dark and bloody ground" of beautiful Kentucky. The tomahawk and torch and scalping knife committed countless unspeakable atrocities that troops arrayed against white enemies were never called upon to endure. Boone's resourceful leadership undoubtedly saved many lives.

Written large in this hideous chapter of pillage, torture and destruction is the name of a white renegade, Simon Girty, often seen leading red attackers. It was not until long after, in 1814, that Girty met a just doom at the hands of Kentuckians, in the War of 1812.

When the Revolution ended in 1782, the British left and the Indian troubles subsided, except for minor depredations. Crops flourished in the widening clearings. Settlers increased and homes spread until by 1784 the first census showed that 30,000 persons inhabited Kentucky, so that by 1786 the region became separate from Virginia.

But Kentucky's troubles were not over. In the two years before 1792, when Kentucky was accepted as a State in the Union, 1500 settlers were killed by Indians and white ren-

[*Turn page*]

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egades on the "dark and bloody ground."

Daniel Boone's troubles weren't over, either. In those latter days of settlement, he met with losses of land and money—and friends, too. Sad and disillusioned, he finally left to accept the grant of a large tract of land in upper Louisiana, then under Spanish rule. There again he suffered injustices, losing title to his land when Louisiana came into United States possession by Jefferson's purchase in 1803.

Twilight Years

The remaining episodes of Daniel Boone's life, in his aging years, were never thoroughly recorded. Many events of historic interest were lost forever in the confused times. But he did get back a piece of his Louisiana land. Congress confirmed title to a portion, in view of his many eminent services.

So, in his twilight years, the famous frontiersman hunted and trapped for a livelihood, and visited around among his scattered children. It is known that he roved westward as far as Missouri. He died in 1820 at the home of a son. A short time before, a celebrated Boston painter, Chester Harding, was commissioned to do Boone's portrait. That likeness became the only picture of Daniel Boone in existence, showing him in buckskins and the coonskin cap by which he is known to almost every schoolchild.

Daniel Boone's self-sacrifice and devotion to his country were more fully recognized after his death, as is so often the case among great public leaders. His body was removed to Frankfort, Kentucky, and a monument erected over it.

Daniel was a shrewd leader, a wily foe and a staunch friend. But he never was a success, in terms of money. He died poor. When Painter Harding found him, he was an old and ailing man, leaning from a wall bunk in a backwoods shelter to roast a strip of venison on a ramrod over an open fireplace. He was a "camper" to the last.

Well, gals and galluses, that about winds up our account of the life of "Dan'l" Boone, the little boy who plunged into the wilder-

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ness with an old flintlock musket and a dog, and for some 70 years was a roaming outdoorsman, and a frontier-pusher.

Modern Camplife

The topic of most of our Frontier Post get-togethers is the great outdoors, from Texas west, so in coming confabs I aim to tell you folks some facts about modern camplife—where and when to go, how to outfit and what's just as important, what NOT to load yourself down with. Too much gear can ruin the most promising outing.

I'll list the articles you should have, and tell the costs. In the meantime, if any of you have any questions on the subject, just write in to Captain Starr, care of TEXAS RANGERS Magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York City 16. A stamped, self-addressed envelope will fetch you my very best advice.

Here are some of the questions that folks ask me the most:

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5.—Is "camping out" dangerous and how can I protect myself from such dangers?

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Just to give you a sample answer, I'll tell you right now the greatest camping danger. It isn't from robbers or plunderers, wild animals or venomous snakes and insects, or from weather hardships, bad water or poor food.

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[*Turn page*]

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I'll tell you about some true ax experiences, along with a heap of other camplore, when we all meet up again in the next Frontier Post. So watch for next issue of TEXAS RANGERS Magazine, gals and galluses. We're going out camping!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

MANY heroes of Texas' fight for independence have given their names to towns and cities throughout the vast State. And Rusk is no exception. Named after the famous hero General Thomas J. Rusk, one of Sam Houston's field officers, Rusk at the end of the Civil War was a railroad junction and a busy little city.

But as Captain William McDowell, head of the Texas Rangers, told Ranger Jim Hatfield—General Rusk would have turned over in his grave if he knew the alarming conditions in the city named after him! Why, they were calling it "Six-Gun Junction!" And with good reason. Ranchers and settlers were being attacked and killed without warning or seeming cause. The entire town had taken on a turbulent aspect. It was obvious the tough elements were there in force—armed, swaggering gunslingers crowding the bars, coarse voices raised in boasting or drunken argument.

The law was at a minimum, with no city marshals on the job who might be supposed to control the riffraff. During late hours, peace-minded citizens remained indoors or walked abroad cautiously.

It is into this maelstrom of violence and murder that author Jackson Cole takes Ranger Jim Hatfield in THE RIDERS OF RUSK in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS Magazine.

Captain McDowell didn't have many specific orders for Hatfield; told him that a renegade named "Comanche" Coombs, part Indian and savage as they come, was head of a gang of bullies menacing Rusk. But what was behind the whole thing, McDowell had

no idea. It was up to Hatfield to get to the scene quickly and investigate.

Jim wasted no time. With his young aid, "Buck" Robertson, he took off for Rusk. On arrival, Hatfield had a streak of good luck. He bumped into Comanche Coombs immediately—and hiding the fact that he was a Texas Ranger, talked Coombs into thinking he was a tough hombre on the lam. Coombs took the bait, and suggested he could make Hatfield town marshal if he'd play along with his, Coombs', gang. Hatfield agreed, and under the name of "Hanford" dons the marshal's star.

It was a precarious game Hatfield played from then on. He discovered that the real force behind the lawlessness in Rusk was a beefy but shrewd person by the name of "Doc" Daniels. But what Daniels was after, Hatfield couldn't tell—at first. And then came the day when the gang called Hatfield's bluff and laid cards on the table.

Read the following passage from THE RIDERS OF RUSK in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS and see the grim situa-

[*Turn page*]

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tion Jim let himself in for when he posed as a man on the wrong side of the law:

They were all ready for him. Daniels had taken command of the play. So far, nothing out of the ordinary had been said, but Hatfield was an old hand at such games.

"We've run into an extraordinary situation, Hanford," purred Doc Daniels. "The real reason you ain't dead is we're interested in findin' out what your real game is. Who employs you?"

Hatfield shrugged.

"Take his guns and search him, Coombsie," commanded Daniels. He picked up a pistol lying under a sheet of paper on the desk before him.

Jim Hatfield felt the icy fingers of doom reaching for his throat. Comanche Coombs, who was behind him and blocking the door, was shifting at Doc Daniel's command, coming to take the Ranger's pistols. He would also find the silver star on a silver circle which would identify the tall man's calling.

Daniels cocked the gun he had hidden under a paper.

"I'll lay a thousand gold to a stale doughnut he's a Texas Ranger," observed Daniels. "Sometimes they bore in like this before makin' arrests."

"Yuh've hit the nail on the head, Doc!" So furious was Comanche Coombs, that his teeth ground audibly. He permitted himself the intense pleasure of violently slapping Hatfield, his horn-hard right hand smacking against the Ranger's cheek and the side of his neck. It stung frightfully, the delicate nerves below the ear crying out against the blow.

But it also offered the tiniest element of hope to the desperate Hatfield. It placed Comanche, told he was off balance and his gun hand busy. It was an excuse for the tall officer to shift without drawing instant lead from all directions.

With the pantherish speed with which he alone was capable, Hatfield threw himself back with all his weight. He was seated and this tipped over the chair, the back of which caught Coombs and doubled him up. The Ranger's long arms were reaching back and he got hold of Comanche, and as they went down in a stunning crash, Doc Daniels fired.

The bullet bore into the floor a foot from the struggling men, fighting like two wildcats. Daniels realized he could not shoot Hatfield without hitting his field chief. Farrizzo and "Blackie" and the others were drawing, starting to help Coombs. Doc Daniels jumped up, blocking "Razorback" Kerr for the moment.

Hatfield put all his power into a roll, banging Comanche's head against the edge of the doorway. He was aware that Coombs' grip relaxed and he broke free, Colt flying to his hand as he came up on one knee. His swift eye pictured Farrizzo, Coombs' silent Mexican crony, about to make the kill. The Ranger Colt roared in the confined space. Farrizzo's pistol exploded, but it was short. The broad figure staggered against Blackie Pyle, who began screeching. Pyle knew the tall man's terrific speed and in his panic flung himself flat, groveling beside the desk.

The Ranger was nearly outside. Doc Daniels was next, for he was cool as he took aim. Hatfield let go another bullet, yet even as he raised his

thumb off the hammer he felt tearing metal along his folded thigh. His slug cut a noisy furrow across the flat desk top. Jagged splinters appeared in its wake and it must have burned Daniels, for he screamed and fell over on Razorback Kerr, upsetting him. The two disappeared behind the desk.

Quick bullets rattled the slower gunhands. The slashing Colt barrel connected with Comanche Coombs' temple, the sharp sight bringing the blood, knocking the breed to the floor.

Now Hatfield was out. But his left leg was useless, trousers ripped, wound spurting. He rose, but could stand only on one foot. Not far away stood the golden sorrel, but he was beyond that open doorway. His cursing enemies were rapidly pulling themselves together, to drill him from the office.

The shock, the violent exertion kept the breath burning in Hatfield's heaving lungs.

"After him! He's hit!" roared Doc Daniels.

Hatfield swung to hop to the end of the building, hoping he might whistle over Goldy. Then the cool gray-green eyes sighted the riders pelting at him. They were Comanche Coombs' killers, whooping it up as they spurred in.

Gun up, the hammer spur under his thumb joint, the gallant Ranger prepared to go down fighting!

Well, good folks, we'll leave Texas Ranger Hatfield on that precarious spot. How Jim escapes from what looks like certain death; how he finally finds out what lay behind the killings in Rusk; how he makes his final tangle with Doc Daniels and his gang—will be told in THE RIDERS OF RUSK in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS magazine.

In the next issue, too, Long Sam Littlejohn is with us again, in LONG SAM DELIVERS A MESSAGE, by Lee Bond. There'll be other stories, and a fact article in the series on Texas Rangers—TOP MAN. So look forward to the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS!

OUR MAIL BAG

WELL, here we are back in the bag again—we have our nose in the Mail Bag and we like what we see and read there! Your response to our plea for more correspondence directed toward us has been pretty good. But we'd like to be swamped with more of your opinions regarding TEXAS RANGERS magazine. So send along your

[*Turn page*]

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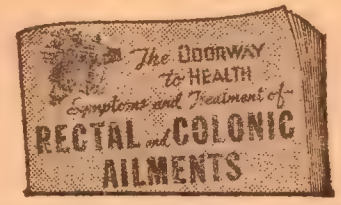

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comments and criticisms. Here are a few we've received recently:

Whats' wrong with everyone saying that they don't want Jim Hatfield to fall in love? Why, that would make the story perfect! People say he wouldn't be a Lone Wolf, with a girl. Well, he isn't one now with that Buck Robertson. Why not put Hatfield's dream girl in the story instead?—*David Mayrs, Vancouver, B. C.*

I have been reading the Jim Hatfield stories for a long time. The last few haven't been so good, since Jim has got mixed up with a girl and a kid. We have plenty of magazines that go for nothing but love stories. Why can't the readers that don't care for love stories have at least one magazine for their own? I've been hoping Jim would again be the Lone Wolf, but it looks like that's out anymore. Unless the author leaves Buck and Anita out, I for one will quit buying TEXAS RANGERS.—*Mary I. Sharp, Owensboro, Kentucky.*

I have been a reader of the Jim Hatfield stories for over eight years, and always liked them very much indeed. But lately, with the addition of Buck and Anita Robertson, the pattern of the stories has turned from very good to just fair. I approve of Jim having a girl like Anita waiting for him at Austin, but disapprove of him taking Buck along on his assignments. Because as the Lone Wolf, as he is known, he should be alone, so that we can have back the old Jim Hatfield, the greatest fiction character in all the West.—*G. Sevigny, Ottawa, Ontario.*

I have been reading TEXAS RANGERS for quite a while. I like Jim Hatfield. But I also like Doc Swap. I don't like Long Sam Littlejohn too good. I am sorry when Doc Swap is not in the magazine. I like the stories about Buck and Anita Robertson in with Jim Hatfield.—*Mrs. W. H. Mannes, Miami, Arizona.*

What has become of the real Jim Hatfield? The real Lone Wolf? Twenty of us readers of Jim Hatfield are going to drop clear out from reading Jim Hatfield stories unless the girl and Buck are dropped altogether. How can he be called the Lone Wolf when there is some one with him all the time? I have just finished reading THE WASTELAND EMPIRE and I can truly say this was the finest story I have ever read. What happened to my old friend Doc Swap? We shore miss him.—*Charles H. Alton, Seymour, Missouri.*

Say! What's the matter? You haven't been putting Doc Swap in. I like him, he's always good for a laugh. Be sure to put him in the next issue. I like Long Sam Littlejohn, too.—*Sheila Wilson, Poynette, Wisc.*

I don't know why all this hullabaloo about Buck and Anita Robertson. I think they are grand characters and help the stories along.—*Wilbur M. Krant, Madison, Wisc.*

Say, that Buck Robertson is a real hero, isn't he? Just the kind of a pal for Jim Hatfield to

ride the river with. Keep him in the yarns as they sure do get better and better, especially when Buck Robertson is in them.—*Marylin D. M. Crange, Charleston, S. C.*

More power to Buck Robertson! This character is certainly liked by me and everybody else in my family.—*Edward G. Hanes, New York City.*

There you are—there's a whale of a difference of opinion about the Robertsons, and we've printed both sides of the story, giving the cons first place and putting the pros last. What do you think? The Robertsons do not appear in every story, and they were originally introduced in response to requests from readers who wanted Jim Hatfield to have companions riding the trails with him. We'll let the readers judge—and when all the votes are in, we'll see who wins. So far it's about fifty-fifty, according to the letters we get, only a very few of which are quoted above.

Keep sending correspondence our way! We'll read it all, and select the most interesting ones for quotation here. Please address all your letters or postcards to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. So long, everybody, until the next time! And thanks, folks!

—THE EDITOR.

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

THE RIDERS OF RUSK

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

•

TOP MAN

The True Story of Ranger McDonald

By HAROLD PREECE

•

Long Sam Delivers a Message

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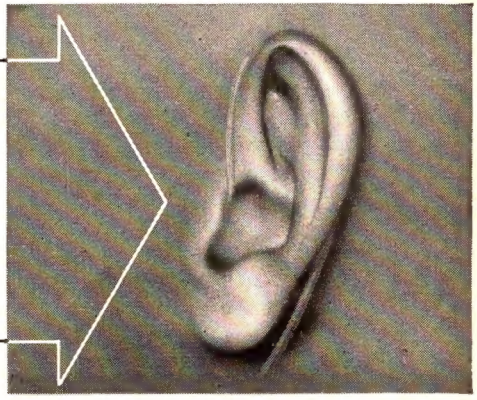

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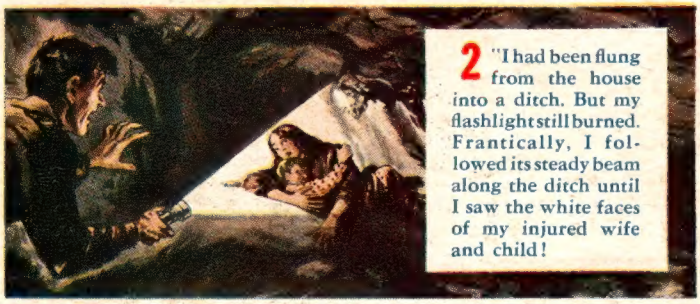

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